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THE HIDDEN DWARF

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POPPY OTT DETECTIVE STORIES

THE HIDDEN DWARF

BY

LEO EDWARDS

AUTHOR OF

THE POPPY OTT BOOKS
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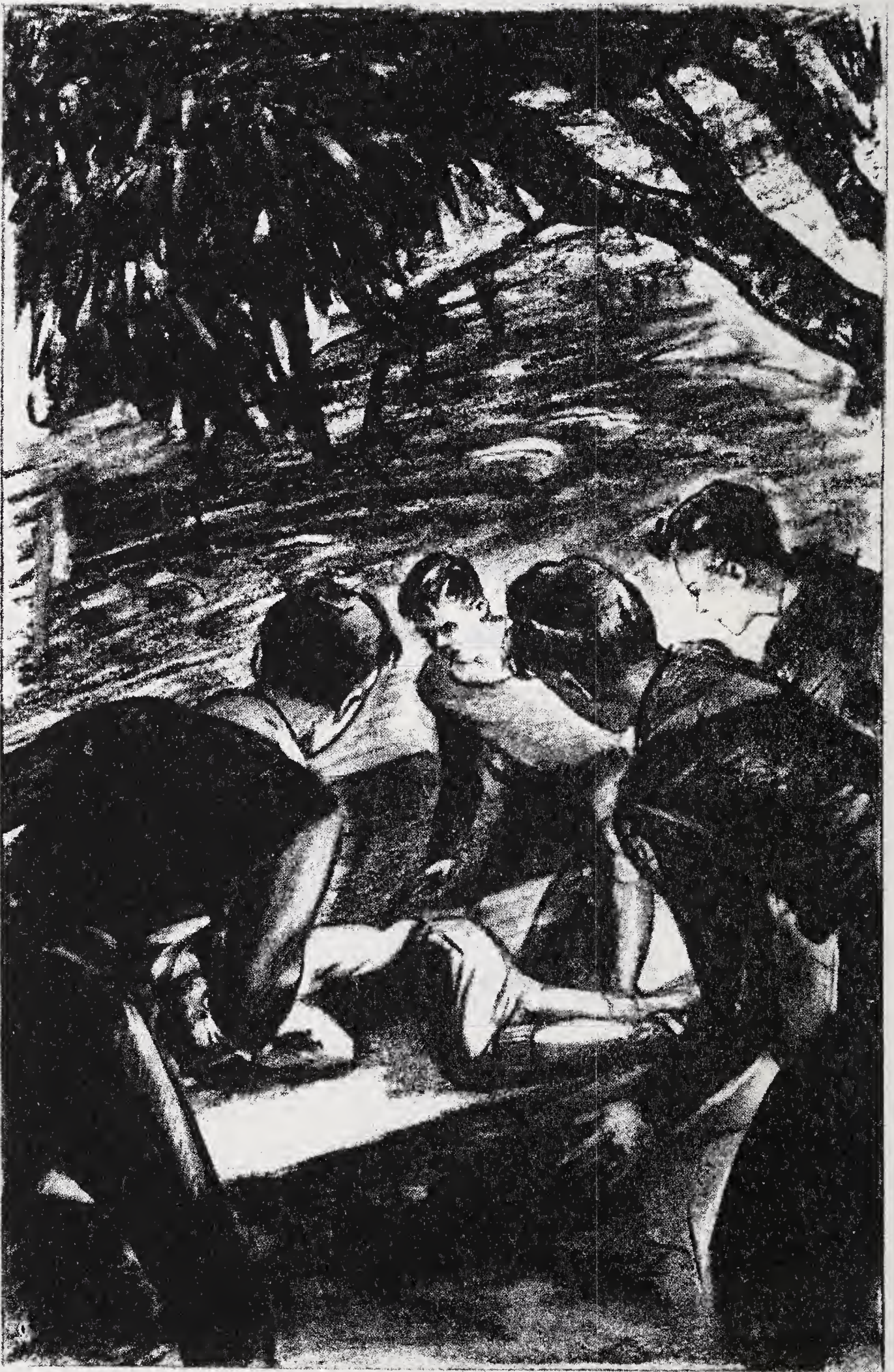
Dedicated
To
**the Four Scouts
in Room Fifteen**

BOBBIE CRUMP

NED SMITHBACK

DILL PICKLE DILLON

SPINNER FREY



TUBBY HAD CLAW MARKS ALL OVER ONE CHEEK,
AND A BLOODY NOSE.

The Hidden Dwarf

Frontispiece (Pages 1-5)

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THE HIDDEN DWARF

CHAPTER I

THE HIDDEN DWARF

FIRST, I suppose, I should tell you who I am and why I'm writing this story. Well, my name is Hugo Frey—or, if you prefer, you can spell it Fry, as that is the way it's pronounced. And I'm writing this story because Poppy Ott and Dory Trot asked me to.

If you care to know more about me, I'm thirteen (though small for my age—gr-r-r!), a second-class Boy Scout, and this coming fall, when school starts, I'll have the honor of sitting with the Freshies—or should I say they'll have the honor of sitting with me? Ahem! Yes, I think that last is the best.

Further, I've got a pug nose (so the girls tell me), greenish-blue eyes (so my Scoutmaster tells me) and a mop of straw-colored hair that could stand a lot more combing (so Mum tells me).

From which you can easily figure out that I'm not so much to look at. But I have a lot of dandy

pals among the Boy Scouts and at school, and if you can show me a boy anywhere who gets more fun out of life than me, I sure would like to meet him.

Yes, sir, I'm pretty well satisfied with my pug nose, my bristly hair, my pals, my home and everything else, but, gee-whizz, I sure do wish I'd put on a little weight! I want to be a football star when I get up in high school, but if I don't start stretching out pretty soon they won't even let me be water-boy—for fear I'll fall in the jug and that'll be the end of me!

I don't know how this story is going to turn out, as I don't pretend to be a story teller. It's supposed to be a detective story, and as Poppy and Dory are the two detectives involved, I argued, at the end of the case, that they should tell the story themselves—or one of them. But they both insisted that I tell it. I knew a whole lot more about the Hidden Dwarf's early life (from what he had told me himself) than they did, they said, and knowing all the rest, too, logically I was the one to tell the complete story.

So here goes!

When people ask me where I live I always say in Madison, Wisconsin, though I don't actually live *in* Madison. I live on the east shore of Lake Monona, at least five miles by road from the heart of the city, though straight across the lake it's only a little more than a mile.

I can see the Capitol dome from my bedroom window. There aren't any high office buildings in Madison, you know—that's against the law. The dome stands out above everything else. There's something about it that makes a fellow think of *big* things—that maybe some day he'll be sitting in there, too, in the Assembly or Senate. At least that's the way I always feel when I look across at it. Every morning when I get up and take my usual look at it, I say, well, Spinner, that corner over there, or that other corner, is going to be yours some day, so hurry up and brush your teeth and get to school to learn something to deserve it.

This fall I'll have to go to school right in Madison, but thus far I've had all my schooling out there in the country, with the rest of the kids living around there, whose fathers for the most part, like mine, work in the city, driving back and forth morning and night. Our Scoutmaster is one of our teachers—a tall boyish-looking sandy-haired man named Mr. Ole Quickley. There were nineteen of us in the troop at the time of my story, but I won't try to give you all their names here. That'll come later. Right now I'm going to tell you about my first meeting with the Hidden Dwarf.

It was on a Saturday morning in early June, just before the close of school. I was out in the woods getting some rich dirt for Mum's flowers, when suddenly an arrow whizzed right over my head.

After it, through the bushes, came a well-dressed kid even smaller than me, but with a face that showed that he was much older—a little wizened rat-like face, it was, with eyes to match. I saw at a glance, too, that he had a crippled back.

"What are you doing here?" he went at me furiously. "If you're spying on me, you better get out of here in a hurry, or I'll take you down and pound the stuffin' out of you."

"You and who else?" I stood up to him, wondering who in Sam Hill he was and why he should fly at me so venomously. I thought I knew all the kids around there, but I certainly never had met him before. He was an entirely new kind to me.

"I don't need the help of anybody else," he fired back at me, coming still closer, with a threatening air. "I can do it all alone, for I'm older than I look. I'm all muscle, too. So if you don't want that face of yours pushed through the back of your head, you better clear out of here in a hurry. I don't intend to monkey with you."

"Oh, go suck a lemon," I told him. "You don't own this woods. And if you start anything with me, sour-puss, you're going to be sorry."

"Who are you, anyway?" he scowlingly demanded.

"Christopher Columbus," I scowled back.

"Well, I bet I know more about birds than you do," he took a new tack.

"What did you think *I* was?" I asked him, re-

ferring to the shot that he had taken at me. "A peacock?"

"A peacock? With that pan of yours?" he sneered. "Don't make me laugh."

"Well, *your* pan wouldn't look so much out of place in a dirty sink," I told him.

"That's it—make fun of a cripple!" he flared again, his beady eyes fairly spitting fire. "You're a credit to that Boy Scout uniform, you are. Do all Boy Scouts run around and make fun of cripples? Is that what they teach you?—along with your *fire* building and *knot* tying?"

"Say, what's the matter with you, anyway?" I curiously asked. "Wouldn't they let you have your usual bib this morning for breakfast?—or have you got a pin pricking you some place?"

"I don't like spies," he grated. "And I don't like Boy Scouts, either. You're a lot of sissies. All you do is build fires and tie knots. You think you know all about the woods, just because you get a Scout hatchet for Christmas. But I bet I can name ten times as many native birds as you can. I can name every bird in Wisconsin, and tell you how it builds its nest, and where, and how many eggs it lays and everything."

I sat down on a log.

"Well, let's start with the robin," I genially suggested. "What does he look like—when he gets his red vest off? I'd like to get in on some of this big stuff."

He started to grin then, but it wasn't a pleasant grin. There was something about it that made you think that everything inside of him had hardened up, from pain from his back maybe, or from mistreatment. He wasn't at all the kind of a boy you'd pick for a chum. He gave you a feeling of distrust—and uneasiness, too! The tricky kind.

"What is your name?" he asked again, sitting down beside me, his home-made hickory bow resting in his lap.

"Spinner Frey," I told him.

"Well, why didn't you say so in the first place?"

"Why didn't you ask me civilly?" I returned.

"I thought you were spying on me."

"I never saw you before," I told him. "Anyway, why should I spy on you?"

"There's a mystery about me," he solemnly declared, his fingers twitching nervously.

Gosh!—I began to think I'd bumped into a lunatic!

"They tell me at the Home that I'm an orphan," he went on, with a peculiar tense eagerness, his fingers still twitching. "But I know better. And some day I'm going to learn the truth. I hate that old Professor at the Home. *He* knows why I've been hidden away there! That's what I am! A Hidden Dwarf! You wouldn't think it, but I'm eighteen years old. For eighteen years someone has been paying Professor Turner to keep me hidden there. Does that look like I'm

an orphan? It certainly does not. I think it's my mother. She didn't want a crippled baby on her hands, so she chucked me in that old Home, maybe to get my money. But she's going to pay when I get at the truth. I may even kill her."

Of all the crazy nuts!

"Well, I'm awfully glad I didn't happen along just before the murder," I told him. "Your aim might have been a little bit better then."

"Oh, I'm going to use a gun for that," he told me quickly, running his hand over his bow. "I'm just out shooting birds now."

"But you shouldn't shoot birds," I reproved. "That's destructive. You could be arrested for it, too—if you shoot song birds. If you know so much about birds, I should think you'd want to protect them, instead of destroy them."

Up he jumped, ready again to bite my head off.

"Oh, there you go preaching at me!" he scowled. "That's why I hate you Boy Scouts. You think you're so smart—always telling people what they shouldn't do. I don't suppose *you* even use worms when you go fishing," he sneered. "It would be destructive to kill a worm. I suppose *you* have a rubber worm—one that doesn't squirm when you put it on a hook."

There was no use trying to talk sense to a kid like that, so I decided to pass it off with a little fun.

"Sure thing, that's the way I got rich," I pleas-

antly told him. "I've got a machine that grinds up old auto tires into rubber fishing worms, which I sell by the millions—believe it or not!"

"I never talked with a boy like you before," he curiously eyed me.

"Would you like my autograph?" I sweetly asked.

"And do you have a machine for turning out autographs, too, by the million?" he dryly asked, sitting down again.

"Oh, no, no!" I gave a big gesture. "Every autograph that I turn out is the real thing. I never cheat my public. Of course, I'm too busy days shipping my rubber fishing worms to do any autographing then—so I had to train myself to do it in my sleep. In a busy season, though, I certainly feel it in my wrist when I get up in the morning."

"You ought to go on the radio with that line," he told me, after a long amused look at me.

"*Ought* to?" I repeated, staring back. "Do you mean to tell me that you've never heard me on the air?—the famous wiggle-woggle rubber fishing-worm program, with the rippling wriggle? Why, I do all the singing, crack all the jokes, play all the instruments in the orchestra and everything else. I don't like it, though," I wagged indifferently. "I hate to loaf around that way. I'm hoping some day to have a program that really gives me a chance to do something."

He looked now as though he was beginning to like me.

"I bet you make a lot of friends," he spoke feelingly, which I took as a feeler that he'd like to be included among them.

"It's easy enough to make friends," I sobered down, realizing that his condition, and surroundings, too, probably, weren't things to be taken lightly. "All you have to do is to show the people around you that you want to be friends. You'll never get them, though, by being a crab."

"Have you got a father and mother?" he then intently asked.

"Sure thing."

"Do you love them?"

"*And*, how!"

"Well, suppose they were both taken away from you to-morrow. Suppose days and weeks and years went by and you never saw them again, or even heard from them. Suppose on top of that something happened to your back, that disfigured you and turned people against you—and a dull gnawing pain came there that you couldn't stop. All day long you had it, and at night you tossed in your bed trying to find a more comfortable position. And all the time there wasn't a single person around you who really cared for you—just hired people and other kids as love hungry as you yourself. Suppose that all happened to *you*. Do you think then that you could talk so lightly about

rubber fishing worms, and give advice to crippled kids about making friends? Crabby? Sure, I'm crabby. And I bet you'd be crabby, too, if you were in my place."

"Can't the doctors do anything for you?" I kindly asked, my sympathies aroused.

"No. I guess I was born this way."

"But there ought to be some way to stop the pain."

"Oh, they give me 'shots' at the Home. But that doesn't drive the pain away—it just deadens it for the time being."

"But they *do* try to help you?" I persisted.

"Oh, sure," he admitted, nodding. "No one there has ever intentionally mistreated me. The trouble is that I'm so unhappy and so nervous from my pain that I want to fly at everybody's throat, the same as I flew at you a few moments ago. I knew, of course, that you really weren't a spy. I imagine a lot of things about myself and my people outside, but I knew nobody would hire a Boy Scout to spy on me."

"You just wanted to start trouble, huh?"

"Yes. At the Home it seems that I'm in trouble with the other kids all the time. But they aren't like you. They never try to make a fellow laugh. Some of them aren't even right in the head. We're all kids, I guess, whose parents didn't want us around. No one ever gets adopted in our place—when a kid comes there he stays till he dies or

his relatives take him out again. Professor Irvin Turner runs the place for what he can get out of it—and I guess he gets plenty from the most of us. He'll take in any kind of a kid, sick or well, for his price."

"But you haven't told me yet what your name is?" I reminded.

"I can't tell you my real name—I don't know it. Rodger Cash is the name they gave me at the Home."

"Where is this Home?" I curiously asked.

"Down the lake shore a couple of miles," he pointed. "It's that place with the high iron fence around it. You surely must have seen it, if you live around here yourself."

"Oh, sure. But it says 'Sanitarium' over the front gate. I always thought it was some kind of a hospital."

"Well," came dryly, "Professor Turner couldn't very well put up a sign that said, 'Paid Home for kids with crippled spines and feeble minds,' could he? That wouldn't look so good."

"Can you get out whenever you want to?" I asked.

He laughed harshly.

"What do you suppose they've got that fence for? They can't let dopey kids run around loose. So we've all got to stay in."

"But how did you get out to-day?"

"In a grocery truck that comes there every

week-day morning. I ran away last year," he bragged.

"Where did you go?" I asked.

"Up north, in the woods. You were just razzing me about shooting birds, but I don't shoot a lot of them. I just shoot the ones that I want for my stuffed-bird collection. I've mounted more than a hundred. That's what I ran away for—to get some of the birds that summer up north. A detective followed me and brought me back."

"A detective? You mean a policeman, don't you?" I corrected.

"No, a private detective—named Harrison Trot. He lives over across the lake."

"Well, you *must* be important," I told him, curiously eyeing him, "if they hired a private detective to run you down."

"Yes," he nodded, "that's the thing that set me to thinking—that and what the other kids told me when I got back. Old Turner had been running around clawing his hair like a wild man, they said, and phoning the detective's house a dozen times daily to learn what progress he was making. Other kids had slipped out, but the Professor never made such a fuss over them."

"What did he do then?"

"Usually all he did was to phone the Madison police and the kid's relatives. But *me!*—he hired one of the cleverest detectives in the country to get me. I'd be dumb not to know from that that

he considered me more important than the other kids. But why? Am I a rich kid? Is someone stealing my money? Any time I want money for bird books or mounting stuff I get it—so there must be a lot of money coming from some place. And who more likely than from my mother?"

"Oh, no!" I firmly told him. "Gosh, no kid's mother would do a thing like that. Why, mothers are just *wonderful*. Instead of taking from you, they're always giving. Of course, they scold over dirty tracks on the floor, and sometimes a fellow gets a spat—but you just get sick or in trouble and see what happens! Your mother is the first one there to help you. No, sir, Rodger," I declared, "you want to get that idea out of your head. Whoever is wronging you, it isn't your mother. You couldn't ever make me believe that. I wish you wouldn't think it yourself, either."

"You act like you're interested in me," he spoke eagerly.

"I am, of course. You say you hate Boy Scouts—but Boy Scouts are taught to interest themselves in people and to help them whenever possible. I've just been wondering if there isn't some way I can help you."

Here a shrill whistle came from the direction of the road.

"That's the grocery boy," the dwarf told me quickly, picking up his bow and arrow. "He told me that he'd whistle for me on his way back. I

wish I didn't have to go, Spinner!—I wish I could stay out here forever. And one of these days I *am* going to run away again—when I get enough money saved up. But I'm not going till I learn the truth about myself. The Professor's got a whole office full of papers. I've been through some of them on the sly, and am waiting my chance now to go through the rest. Maybe an old letter or a cancelled check or something like that will give me the clew I'm after. I can only slip out on Saturdays—we have school the other days. And on Sundays there isn't any grocery truck. Do you think you'll be here next Saturday?" he eagerly asked.

"I will, if you want me to," I promised.

"Swell! I may have something exciting to report by then."

There was another sharp whistle.

"You better hurry," I nervously told him, "or you'll get left."

"Thanks for being so kind to me, Spinner," he spoke feelingly. "You're one Boy Scout I like, anyway. And I hope you won't have your arm in a sling when next I see you—from writing too many autographs in your sleep."

"Oh, I'll probably be writing them with my toes by then," I grinned. "But good-by till next Saturday."

"Good-by," he called, waving his bow.

After which he disappeared into the bushes.

CHAPTER II

CAMPING PLANS

GETTING my dirt home, I helped Mum for the better part of an hour and then ran down the street to our Scoutmaster's house, rapping briskly on the back screen door.

That poor kid! It certainly wasn't right, I told myself, unable to get him out of my mind, that he should have to look that way and be in pain all the time, too. If only I could do something to help him, either by getting him into our Scout troop, so that he could have a little fun like other boys, or by getting him medical help for his back.

"Is Mr. Quickley here?" I inquired, when Mrs. Quickley, a lively, merry little woman, came to the door with the smell of cookies about her.

"No, Hugo, he's at school correcting examination papers."

Those old examination papers!

"I hope you gave him a good breakfast," I grimaced.

"Hugo," she kept a straight face, "if you must know the truth, this was one of the mornings here when everything went wrong. The coffee?—oh, it was terrible! And the eggs and bacon were burned to a crisp. I'm very sure that by now that

poor husband of mine is all doubled over with acute indigestion, and probably as cranky and unreasonable as a cuffed bear."

I clutched my head.

"Oh, oh!" I groaned, rolling my eyes with what was intended to be a tragic expression. "I guess I better go home for an aspirin."

"You come right in here, young man," she took me by the ear and drew me in, merrily laughing now. "What you need, instead of an aspirin, is a couple of my big fat ginger cookies fresh from the oven. And don't imagine, either, you little sham, that you deceived me any about your school work. I know that you wouldn't let Mr. Quickley down that way. You're not that kind of a Boy Scout."

"I've been doing a lot of fooling around in class lately," I told her, with a little genuine uneasiness this time. "I'm afraid my grades won't be anything to brag on."

"Well," she laughed again, "if it'll ease your mind any, I can tell you truthfully that Mr. Quickley did have an exceptionally fine breakfast. Waffles and genuine maple syrup! I knew he had examination papers to correct this morning and sent him off as happily as I could. But I better take a peek at my cookies. I suppose you can smell them baking."

"Um!" I hungrily sniffed. "Oh, boy!—can I!"

"Well, you sit here by the kitchen table," she

indicated, as she hurried to the stove, "and I'll have some ready for you in a jiffy."

We think that Mr. Quickley is one of the finest and kindest leaders that any group of Boy Scouts ever had. At our Tuesday-night meetings, when our work is done, he always has some kind of a swell new game for us. Some of the early members thought that our meetings were going to be all games—it was a big bore to them to have to sit quietly, as in school, and learn things about first aid and the like. But if we weren't to learn the things that were a part of Scouting, Mr. Quickley argued, there really was no justification for our meetings, as we didn't have to come there to play. He said he wanted to build up a troop of Boy Scouts who actually *were* Scouts, knowing all the things that Boy Scouts were supposed to know. He said, if we'd work with him to that end, he'd see that we got plenty of fun out of it, too. One or two of the early members dropped out. But those who remained quickly got into the spirit of the work, our parents helping by buying us suits so that we would *feel* like Scouts.

As spring had come on, Mr. Quickley had had a surprise for us almost every week—a special short hike after school, a "weenie" roast or something like that, with longer hikes deep into the woods every other Saturday. This, and our regular Tuesday-night work, took up a lot of his time, but he gave it cheerfully, helping one and all alike,

seemingly getting as much fun out of it as we did ourselves—which was mainly why we liked him so well. Boys know when they're getting a square deal—and they like to show their appreciation.

In much the same way I could run along and tell you a lot of swell things about Mrs. Quickley and the parties she gives us several times a year. But you should know from what I've already told you about her how kindly she is. She's that way with all the Scouts. Next to Mum and an aunt of mine, I think she's the nicest woman in the whole world—and right then, as I got going on her fresh ginger cookies, I was willing to concede that she was the best cookie baker in the whole world, too.

"They're swell," I told her.

"Well, don't burn yourself, Hugo," she dryly cautioned.

"They *are* kind of hot," I conceded, blowing. "But then," I grinned, "I've got a big mouth to cool them off in."

The cookies finally put down, I got around to the main thing that had brought me there.

"Say, Mrs. Quickley," I began, "didn't I hear you say one time that you used to work for a famous spine specialist over in Madison?"

"Yes—Dr. Largo."

"He really can do wonders, huh?"

"He's certainly done some truly wonderful things for crippled children."

"Well, just a little while ago," I told her, "I met a crippled boy over in the woods. He belongs in that Sanitarium down the road. He says his case is hopeless, but I've just been wondering if that doctor of yours couldn't do something for him. He says he has plenty of money, so he ought to be able to pay for an examination, at least."

"I should think he'd get all the care he needed where he is, Hugo."

"They give him 'shots' to kill the pain in his back, but I doubt if they do much else for him, from what he told me. He's awfully down in the mouth, too."

"I'm sure Dr. Largo would be only too glad to help him, if he could. Would you like to have me phone him for an appointment?"

"Yes—will you?" I eagerly accepted the offer. "Gee, that'll be swell!"

Mr. Quickley merrily whistled in here.

"Young fellow, I want to see you at Scout headquarters to-night promptly at seven bells," he told me, in his usual brisk businesslike way.

"Camping plans, huh?" I guessed. "When are we going?"

"Friday morning."

"And where? To the same place we went last year?"

"Have you ever been to Dragon Lake, Hugo?"

"No—where is it?"

"North-west of here, in that intensely glacial-

ized region that we were discussing in class the other day."

"Is that where we're going?"

"That's the place. You and the boys are going to like it, too, for the rocky country thereabouts never has been built up like the rest of the state, but still has its miles of natural forests stretching out on all sides. A great place for hikes, but a bad place to get lost in—which I'll want you boys to remember when we get there."

"Oh, boy, it sounds better every minute," I cried. "It can't be too wild and wooded to suit us, Mr. Quickley. Is the lake good for swimming?"

"Yes—if you aren't afraid of dragons," he laughed.

"Are there supposed to be dragons there?"

"The Indians evidently thought so—when they named it."

"But there's no such thing as a real dragon," I declared.

"Well, you boys can settle that when you get there. It's a very beautiful lake, I'm told, and one of the deepest in the state."

"Say, I've got an idea, Mr. Quickley," I eagerly told him.

"Yes?"

"Four or five of us can pretend that there really are dragons there, and some night we'll fix up a fake one and scare the wits out of the rest. Take Tubby Mundy! You can make *him* believe any-

thing. And, boy, will he ever lay those big feet of his down when he thinks there's a dragon after him!"

"Well, it might be a good joke, if you didn't carry it too far," I partly got consent. "There's always danger, you know, in too severe a scare. But we'll go into that when we get there."

"Is each boy going to take his own pup-tent?" I asked.

"No, we aren't taking any tents this year, Hugo. I've just completed arrangements with the superintendent of a state park there to use an old summer-resort hotel that the state acquired with its land purchases a few years ago. The boys ought to like that for a change—sleeping in bunks under cover, and cooking on an old hotel range. Except for the caretaker, who lives there, we'll have the whole rambling building all to ourselves—with just a small fee to pay for the electric lights. Which is pretty fine of the state, I think."

"Oh, boy!" I cried, my enthusiasm now boundless. "That ought to be double fun—in an old place like that."

"Tenting is swell in nice weather," Mr. Quickley went on. "But the hotel, I figure, will be much better for us if we happen to strike a rainy period. You boys will have an enormous play room downstairs. We can eat in there, on picnic tables provided, or on the big front porch overlooking the lake. The bunks are all in scattered guest rooms

upstairs. The state has even put in a generous supply of dishes and pans. All we'll have to take, in addition to our personal belongings, will be blankets and food. But you be around to-night at the appointed time and I'll tell you all about it. Pass the word around to the other Scouts, too. Tell them I want everybody out, for we're leaving early, and I'll want to know to-night exactly who to count on."

Mrs. Quickley followed me to the door.

"How about your new boy friend, Hugo?" she asked, as Mr. Quickley himself went on into the front part of the house. "Do you think you'll see him before you leave and arrange for the intended examination?—or do you want to let the whole matter rest till you return?"

I gave that quick thought.

"I'd rather see him before I go, if I can. I tell you!—I'll phone him this afternoon and have him meet me at some point where we can talk through the fence. I'll let you know what he says. But I better get going now and peddle the good news. Thanks a lot for the cookies. And if Tubby Mundy happens to drop in, no 'dragon' talk, now! Remember!"

A forlorn gurgling agonizing toot here came from down the street.

"That sounds like him now," laughed Mrs. Quickley. "Evidently he's already heard about the intended camping trip and is out in his yard.

practicing bugle calls on that trombone of his."

"Suffering cats!" I squawked, clawing my hair. "Do we have to listen to those crazy bugle calls of his again this year? Last year, at Rock Lake, his bugle calls scared all the mud hens away."

"But no Boy Scout camp is complete without a bugler of some sort," she insisted.

Another dying-calf toot stabbed our ears.

"He sounds like he's choking to death on it," I grimaced. "Maybe I better hurry down there and give him a little artificial respiration—or pull it out of his throat. But remember what I just said—if he should happen to drop in. Don't you give me away."

"But, Hugo," she asked, with amused eyes, "what'll you do if you should discover that there really are dragons there, as the early Indians believed?"

"Then I'll bring you home one for a souvenir," I lightly promised.

Real dragons! And that close to us—right there in central Wisconsin! Boy, that was funny! Some early Indian probably had seen a dragon-shaped log floating around in the lake or had completely made up and circulated the story himself. Anyway, I didn't take any stock in it.

Yes, that's the way I talked before we went. But wait till I tell you what happened to poor Tubby there!

Gosh!

CHAPTER III

NEW FRIENDS

I TRIED twice that Saturday to get the dwarf on the phone, getting the evasive excuse both times that he was "too tired to leave his room."

On Sunday I was told, when I called, that he was "attending services and couldn't be disturbed," and on Monday that he was "in the classroom." This kept up till Wednesday, at which time I grimly decided to act.

There had been a lot in the Madison newspapers recently about a strange "monkey murder" in Rockcliff, a little country town just east of us. Involved in this case, as I had curiously followed it from day to day, were two boy detectives, one an Illinois boy named Poppy Ott and the other a Madison boy named Dory Trot.

The dwarf needed help and needed it badly—there were no if's or and's about that. Hidden away there years ago, for some unknown mysterious reason, it was perfectly plain now that the man in charge there intended to keep him hidden, denying him the right even to communicate with outside friends.

To help him with his crippled back, as planned, I first had to get him out of there, and the best way

to do that, I had concluded after my fruitless phone calls, was to hire a detective to learn the truth about him, so that he could go to court, if necessary, and fight his way out. Of course, I hadn't any money to offer a detective, but somehow I had the conviction that these two boys who had done so well in Rockcliff, and who according to the newspapers were now living together in Madison in the Trot boy's home, would be only too glad to help, if once made to understand how badly help such as they could give was needed, even though there was no certainty of later pay.

Anyway, it was my plan now to go to Madison and have a talk with them. And with only two nights left before the start for camp, I decided that the sooner I made the trip the better.

At supper I stuck a doughnut in a fork, for a microphone, and started broadcasting across the table.

"Station H-U-G-O calling station D-A-D," I announced. "Station H-U-G-O calling station D-A-D. Will station D-A-D come in, please?"

"Hey! What is this?" asked Dad, surprised. "What's going on here? What kind of nonsense is this?"

I tossed him a doughnut.

"Come on in," I told him.

"Aw! Go on and eat your supper," he told me.

"Station H-U-G-O calling station D-A-D," I announced again. "Station H-U-G-O calling sta-

tion D-A-D. Emergency. Come in, station D-A-D."

"Go ahead," Mum laughingly urged Dad. "Goodness me, what's the use of having a boy in the family if you can't have a little nonsensical fun with him occasionally?"

"All right, all right," complied Dad, getting set. Then he announced: "Station D-A-D now ready to talk. Come on in station H-U-G-O."

"Station H-U-G-O wants to know what the chances are for a ride into Madison to-night with station D-A-D."

"Who told station H-U-G-O that the well known station D-A-D was going into Madison to-night?"

"Well, Wednesday night is station D-A-D's regular league bowling night, isn't it? And station H-U-G-O would like to see some boys on Rutledge street, if station D-A-D will be a good sport and take station H-U-G-O in."

"How does station H-U-G-O plan on getting home?"

"Station H-U-G-O will meet station D-A-D at the bowling alley."

"Station D-A-D doesn't expect to get home before midnight, which is too late to keep station H-U-G-O out on a school night."

"Station D-A-D is very much behind the times. Station H-U-G-O reporting that there is no regular school to-morrow. All station H-U-G-O has

to do is go back for a picnic and get his report card."

"Does station H-U-G-O expect to pass?"

Mum had a doughnut up now.

"This is station M-U-M," she came in, "reporting favorably to station D-A-D on report card of station H-U-G-O, and urging station D-A-D to comply with station H-U-G-O's wishes about a ride into town. Station M-U-M thinks that station D-A-D should want to have station H-U-G-O with him to-night, knowing that Friday morning station H-U-G-O is leaving for camp for two weeks."

Here Tubby Mundy, the baby elephant of our troop, with a face like a huge red balloon and usually too lazy and sleepy to more than drag his feet along, tumbled wheezing up the back steps.

"Hey, Spinner!" he mysteriously beckoned through the screen door. "Come on out—I want to tell you something."

"What is it?" I asked, hurrying out. "Is your house on fire?"

I couldn't think of anything less important that would bring him running like that.

"There's a dwarf waiting for you over there in the woods," he pointed with his fat hand.

"A dwarf?" I excitedly repeated, my eyes jumping to the indicated spot. "How do you know?"

"I just met him over there. He told me to run and get you."

The Cash boy! But how had he gotten out?—and why was he so anxious to see me? Certainly, I concluded, my excitement growing, it must be something important.

Thanking Tubby, I dashed back in.

"How soon are you going?" I asked Dad.

"What time is it now?"

"Six-thirty."

"Well, I ought to get started by seven, at least."

"Well, listen, Dad! I've got something terribly important to do. It shouldn't take a half hour, but if I should be a little bit longer than that will you please wait for me?"

"I most certainly will," he promised.

"And shall I wait here till you get back?" Tubby called after me, as I started off on the fly.

"No," I called back. "I'm going into Madison with Dad when I get back. See you to-morrow."

I was just about winded when I got there.

"What's the matter?" I quickly asked the dwarf, when he stepped into sight.

"That's what I wanted to know," he anxiously returned, searching my face. "One of the kids told me that you had been phoning over there—he overheard it. So I thought I better get out and find out why. Why did you phone, Spinner?"

"I was intending to talk with you about a doctor—but after what happened I decided the best plan would be to hire a detective to get you out of there and *then* do the doctoring. I don't think

they'd let us in with a doctor now, or let you out, either. You're on the spot, boy."

An expression came into his eyes that made me think he was looking at something miles and miles away.

"As though I don't know it," he murmured. "Probably whoever put me in there would like to see me die there." Then his voice rose. "But I'm not going to die there, Spinner!"

"That's the spirit," I encouraged.

"When'll I see you again?" he longingly asked.

"Not for quite a while," I told him. "I'm going camping Friday for two weeks."

"Camping? Where?"

"At Dragon Lake."

"I never heard of it."

"I never did, either, till our Scoutmaster told us about it."

"Are there any birds around there?" came eagerly, almost hungrily.

"There should be—for there's miles of woods there."

"Gee, I wish I could go with you! Do you think your Scoutmaster would let me go, if I paid double?"

"Not if you had to run away to do it," I bluntly told him.

"How much is it costing you?"

"Ten dollars for two weeks."

"Well, listen!" he cried, with sudden determi-

nation, his jaw squared now. "I'm going. I'm going back and tell that old Professor Turner if he doesn't let me go I'll burn his place down. I know how to scare him! All I've got to do is to threaten to run away again or start a fire over there and he actually turns green. Down in his heart he's scared to death of me—or scared to death rather that he'll lose me. So you tell your Scoutmaster to figure on one more, Spinner. For as sure as I'm standing here, when your cars pull out next Friday morning I'm going to be in one of them."

"I'd like to have you go," I hesitatingly told him, "but, gosh, I'd hate to see you get into more trouble over there. You better think twice about it."

"Don't you worry," he determinedly wagged, his little face hard and set now. "There won't be any trouble over there—for me. I didn't tell you the other time we met, but lately I've been the boss over there. All I've got to do is to start screaming around and threaten to run away and old Turner comes around just as pretty as you please."

"Does he know you're out to-night?"

"No. A couple of the kids helped me over the back gate with a ladder. I musn't stay too long, either, or they're liable to get caught."

I told him then about the two boy detectives I was intending to see that night.

"Dory Trot?" he thoughtfully repeated the

name I had spoken. "Why, he must be the son of Harrison Trot."

Harrison Trot!

"Why, of course!" I cried. "You know, I thought I'd heard that name 'Trot' before. And he's that detective you told me about, isn't he? How stupid of me not to have remembered it. Gosh! I don't know now whether I ought to go there or not. What kind of a man is he, Rodger?"

"I liked him—except that I didn't like being picked up that way."

"Do you think he'd report back to Professor Turner if I took up your case with the boys?"

"Your guess there is as good as mine, Spinner. A man would have to be a two-legged skunk, though, to side in with old Turner."

"And you wouldn't exactly call this detective a two-legged skunk, huh?" I pressed.

"No."

"All right then, I'll pay the boys a visit to-night, as planned," I decided. "And Friday morning I'm really to look for you, huh?" I curiously eyed him.

"Without fail," he promised.

"Well, I suppose you know, better than I do, what you're up against, over there. But if you don't show up I'll be on needles and pins—I can tell you that."

With that we separated, and riding into the city with Dad I got out at Orton Park, which I

crossed diagonally to Rutledge street, and kept on there till I came to the house number that I had earlier taken from the phone book.

"Is this where Dory Trot lives?" I asked the maid, who came politely to the door of the big showy house.

"Yes, sir," she nodded.

"Is he at home?"

"No, he isn't," she shook her white-capped head. "He's somewhere down town."

"Well, is Poppy Ott here then?"

"No, sir. He and Dory are together."

"Do you know when they'll be back?"

"No, sir. They may be gone the whole evening, or they may come in any minute."

"Who is it, Anna?" a man's voice tersely called from the background.

"A Boy Scout, asking for Dory and Poppy."

"Was that Mr. Harrison Trot?" I quickly asked the maid.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, can I see *him* then," I quickly decided. "It's about some detective work."

I don't think she believed me at first, me being just a boy, but my earnestness impressed her.

"If you'll step inside, please—I'll ask Mr. Trot if he can see you. I hope, though, that this isn't just some boyish whim. He resents being needlessly disturbed."

A kindly gray-haired little old lady came by while I was waiting.

"Is Dory in now?" she pleasantly inquired.

"No, ma'am," I shook my head.

"Oh! I thought you were some friend of his—that he had brought in—as he's still very much interested in Scouting."

"I'm waiting to see Mr. Trot," I explained.

"Well, here comes Anna now. Yes, Anna?"

"He's to come in, Mrs. Trot."

"I'll show him in, Anna. And what is your name?" she asked me, as we went together down the beautifully furnished hall.

"Hugo Frey," I told her.

"Well, Mr. Trot is in here," she paused beside an open door. "This is his study. Harrison dear, here is a Boy Scout to see you."

A tall keen-eyed bushy-haired man came forward.

"Yes, I know—Anna told me."

"His name is Hugo Frey."

"Well, Hugo," he extended a friendly hand, "I'm glad to meet you. I will say, though, that I might not have given you this time if it hadn't been for that uniform of yours. But I knew what my son would say if I ever refused to see a Boy Scout. Have a chair here. And now tell me what you've got on your mind."

It was the nicest and prettiest home I ever had

been in, and with the exception of my own parents and Mr. and Mrs. Quickley and a few others, the people here were the nicest I ever had met, too. I knew I was in safe hands.

So I freely told Mr. Trot my whole story—how I had bumped into the crippled dwarf in the woods, what he had told me, then about my fruitless phone calls and everything else. It certainly wasn't right, I heatedly wound up, that a boy, and especially a crippled boy like him and in pain all the time, should be forced to stay in a cheerless unsympathetic place like that. Something had to be done about it.

"But where do you figure I come into the picture, Hugo?" he gravely asked, plainly touched by my story, when I finally stopped. "Did the Cash boy send you to me?"

"No, sir," I waggled, "I got that idea myself—only I really had intended to take up the matter with your son and the Ott boy instead. You see, Mr. Trot, I read about that 'monkey' case of theirs in the newspapers, and I told myself that boys like that surely would help if I could just get to them with my story. Boys *do* enjoy helping one another," I wound up.

"I know that, Hugo. And men of the right sort enjoy helping in a case like this, too."

"Then you *will* take the case?" I excitedly leaned forward, my heart thumping.

"I can't take it myself," he declined. "But I

think I can safely promise you that the boys will."

"Hot dog!" I cried. "Gee, I'll be glad to get that poor kid out of there and doctored up. I have a friend who's going to see Dr. Largo about him."

"Where do you live, Hugo?" I was asked.

"Across Lake Monona, where they built that new grade school last year."

"Your parents are both living, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes, sir! Dad works in Madison. He's a printer."

"Well, to-night when you go home I want you to give your father my hearty congratulations. Tell him that I said he has a mighty fine son. I know of only one better, and that's my own. Now about this boy—I did bring him back last summer, as he told you. Professor Turner hired me to do it and I did it. I've always been sorry, though. I've never been able to get that hunted, hounded, forsaken look of the boy's out of my mind. So I really am glad you brought me this case—it'll enable me, through the boys, to make amends. Professor Turner is liable to have his Home broken up, if it's as much of a jail as the dwarf has told you. Frankly, I know very little about the Professor and his methods. He hired me here, on that other case, and paid me off in his office when I delivered the runaway to him. Altogether I didn't see him more than ten or fifteen minutes. We'll soon get a line on him and get the truth out

of him. But that sounds like the boys coming in now. Yes, that's Dory, all right—the noisy scallawag!"

"What's that, Pop?" a boisterous voice inquired laughingly from the doorway. "Did I just overhear you calling me names? Don't you know there's a ten-dollar fine for that?"

Which was my first glimpse of Dory Trot—a big-bodied overgrown red-headed freckled boy, with friends everywhere, I was to learn later, and a leader in games, sports, deviltry and everything else.

"And who are you, squirt?" he heavily came over to me, grinning. "Who let you out of the nursery?"

"This is Scout Hugo Frey, Dory," Mr. Trot introduced, his hand affectionately resting on the boy's sturdy shoulder.

"Of the Lake Monona fried-egg Freys," I contributed a little nonsense of my own.

That brought a bellow from Dory.

"Hey, Poppy!" he shook the house. "Come in here and meet fried-egg Frey. And bring a teething-ring for him."

"And this, Hugo, is Poppy Ott," Mr. Trot further introduced, as a smaller-framed black-haired, black-eyed boy smilingly came in.

The two boy detectives! You can readily imagine how proud I was to meet them. They were two dandy, manly lads. But how different

they were! Dory supplied all the noise and bluster—Poppy was more thoughtful and reflective. It was probably him, I told myself, who took the lead in puzzling things out, Dory shining when strength and driving force were needed.

Both boys, it seems, had had no particular detective ambitions till they were brought together on the Rockcliff case, but, determined to be detectives now, they had been waiting at Dory's home for just such a case as mine to turn up.

Would they take it? *And*, how! Dory, to show how *he* felt about it, started playfully cuffing me all over the room, finally getting me by the leg and dragging me around.

"Oh, stop it!—stop it, Dory!" Mr. Trot finally cried, with an air of impatience. "There's no use being so noisy. Just see how you've messed this boy up! I'm sorry, Hugo," he started brushing me off. "Some day maybe Dory will develop a little dignified businesslike restraint. Just now he's like a frisky overgrown St. Bernard. But what is it, Anna?" he asked, as the maid appeared in the doorway.

"Professor Turner is waiting to see you, sir."

"Professor Turner?" Mr. Trot repeated, staring. "Well, this *is* a coincidence! The jailer himself, eh?"

"Let's paste him one," growled Dory.

"Oh, Dory!—I'm beginning to lose patience with you. You talk like a rowdy. Anna, close

the door—he mustn't hear us. And you, Hugo!—have you any idea why he's here?"

"No, sir."

"Well, there's just one way to find out—you boys get over there in that curtained recess. That's it! But keep perfectly still now. All right, Anna—just to reverse the usual procedure, suppose you show Mr. Spider into our trap."

CHAPTER IV

FIRE!

QUICKLY arranging the chairs so that the expected visitor would have to sit with his back to us, thus giving us a chance to peep through the curtain crack, Mr. Trot then stationed himself just inside the door.

"Good evening, Professor Turner," he pleasantly greeted, when the visitor came in. "You're quite a stranger around here. But I'm glad you dropped in. I am indeed. Have a chair. And, Anna?" he quickly called after the maid.

"Yes, Mr. Trot," she dutifully returned to the door.

"Some coffee and cakes, please."

"Oh, sir—please!" the visitor remonstrated, in a nervous jumpy voice. "I'd rather get directly to the matter that brought me here, and get away again. That sounds most unsociable, I know. But I *must* get back to the Home as quickly as possible. It is *most* necessary, sir!—*most* necessary!"

"Very well then—that'll be all, Anna. Please close the door. And now, Professor, what *did* bring you here? That dwarf again?"

"Exactly, Mr. Trot. I'm liable to find myself

in great trouble through that unfortunate boy. Every day he becomes more unmanageable."

"Then why don't you return him to his people?" was Mr. Trot's practical advice. "Certainly you don't have to keep him there, do you?"

"I not only have to, Mr. Trot," the voice dropped here to a steady even tone, as though the speaker feared to mention the matter even within the secrecy of the closed room, "but should he ever get away, and harm of any sort befall him, I probably would have to pay with my own life. On account of him, I'm in constant danger of being murdered, sir."

"Well, that does sound serious!" declared Mr. Trot, more surprise showing in his voice, I think, than he intended. "But suppose you tell me the whole story—I'll know better then how I can help you."

"Oh, I can't, sir!—I can't!" came huskily. "That *would* seal my doom."

"And what am I to infer from that?" tersely asked Mr. Trot.

"Simply that I cannot tell you the complete story of the boy's commitment to my institution, sir. I can only tell you that years ago I very unwisely accepted his custody. He was but a few months old then and supposedly a normal baby."

"A normal baby, eh?" Mr. Trot quickly picked that up, his voice showing the pleasure he felt over it. "He wasn't born crippled then?"

"Oh, no, sir!"

"Well, that's certainly good news. Anybody interested in helping the boy ought to be glad to hear that."

Which was intended for me.

And, boy, I *was* glad! And was I ever getting a thrill out of this! I had come there hoping to interest the two boy detectives in the dwarf's case, and here I was cooped up with them in a curtained window recess, almost as much of a detective as they were themselves.

Of the Professor, we could see very little except the upper part of his back and the back of his head. Once when he turned I caught a glimpse of shell-rimmed glasses. He seemed to be unusually long-legged, too—in all, his changing voice included, not at all the type of man I had pictured him to be. I had expected a more cunning type of man, with a crafty scheming voice, but the voice I actually heard was undoubtedly that of a man in deep trouble.

But, then, the dwarf had admitted himself that never once had he been mistreated in the Home. I had just let his own hatred for the man mislead me, I guess.

"What brought on the boy's trouble, Professor?" Mr. Trot inquired.

"That, nobody knows, sir. Certainly it wasn't through any mistreatment or neglect on our part. I can tell you honestly, that I've done everything

in my power to help the boy, getting only his hatred for it, though, in return."

"Truly an unfortunate case. But go on with your story, Professor."

"You know of his interest in birds, Mr. Trot. I encouraged it at the start, feeling that a hobby such as that would help to get his mind off himself. But you know what it led to! To secure certain coveted birds for his collection, that he couldn't get around here, he ran away. I hired you to find him, and if you'll remember, my instructions were that this was to be done quietly, without any word of his absence from the Home getting into the newspapers."

"Yes, I recall that stipulation," concurred Mr. Trot.

"Well, sir, that wasn't just a selfish attempt of mine to avoid unpleasant publicity for my business, as you may have thought at the time. I simply had to keep the boy's flight hidden from outsiders to save my own head from a bullet. Oh," the voice rose here, like a growing wintry wind, "I know this sounds melodramatic!—but, sir, I want you to believe me when I tell you that I'm not exaggerating my danger a single iota."

"I do believe you, Professor," Mr. Trot spoke earnestly. "And I may say, too, that my opinion of you is undergoing considerable of a change. But go on—let's hear the rest of the story, or as much of it as you feel you can safely tell."

“Since the boy’s forced return last summer he has threatened repeatedly to run away again, seemingly realizing, in his crafty cruel way, how the threat frightens me. And it *does* frighten me, sir!—I can’t help showing it. Remember, my life is in danger! But I can’t tell him so—it would just lead to questioning that I must avoid at all hazards. Nor can I tell you all! If I did, Mr. Trot, I’d be afraid of a bullet through that window.”

“It seems incredible to me. Do you actually mean that, Professor?”

“I most certainly do. And what the situation will be at the Home in another few months, with things going as they are, I dread to contemplate. The boy has the upper hand of me and he knows it. But I can’t lock him up to assure keeping him there. I’m like the man in the fable who nursed a tiny serpent and later found a monster on his hands threatening momentarily to devour him. That is exactly the situation out there. Do you wonder that I’m unnerved—that I actually tremble as I sit here in my chair? For what assurance have I that the Cash boy isn’t running into the woods this very instant!—or that my place isn’t in flames! That’s what he threatened to do to-night—either to run away, in spite of me, or burn my place down. His spells before were nothing as compared with the one he had to-night. Sometimes I think he’s mad—the way he acts. You have no comprehen-

sion of it, sir, never having actually seen him in one of his spells."

"But what brought on this particularly violent spell to-night?" Mr. Trot pointedly inquired.

"Oh, yes, sir!—I should have gotten to that sooner as that really is what brought me here. You see, there are some Boy Scouts over there—the Cash boy somehow got in with them and since last Saturday one of these Scouts has been trying repeatedly to get him on the phone. Alarmed, I had the call traced."

"Why?"

"Well, it could have been some kind of an outside plot. But I learned, with great relief, that it was just a call from a neighbor boy. I wish now I'd gone to him to break up his new friendship with my charge then and there. But I didn't, simply putting him off when he called again, and hoping the calls would abruptly cease. But it seems I underestimated the perseverance of this outside boy. His phone calls failing, somehow to-night he got in personal touch with the Cash boy with news of a two-weeks' camping trip. That really is what caused the trouble to-night. Learning of the Scouts' intended camping trip, the Cash boy set his mind on accompanying them. At first, I said no. But finally I gave in, feeling that that was better than running the chance of being burned out or possibly murdered, as a result of his flight."

"And a very sensible decision, I should say,"

endorsed Mr. Trot. "But tell me—is 'Cash' the boy's real name?"

"No, sir."

"What is his real name?"

"I really don't know, sir."

"But isn't the boy ever going to know who he really is?"

"Some day—yes. At least that was his father's promise."

"Oh!" Mr. Trot quickly pounced on that. "So it was his father who brought him to you, was it?"

There was a frightened gasp.

"Mr. Trot!—I didn't mean to say that."

"Is the boy's mother alive?"

"I was told she was dead."

"But his father is alive."

"That's my belief."

"And it's the father you fear!" mused Mr. Trot.

"I didn't say so, sir," came nervously.

"Oh, but that is obvious. But what kind of a father would abandon his child like that!"

"Please let us not attempt to go into that, Mr. Trot," the visitor begged. "What I want of you is to have the boy secretly guarded all the while he's away. I'll want him guarded and protected every moment, sir—every single moment."

"But why secretly?" Mr. Trot dwelt on that point.

"Because it would be like him, if he knew I had

anybody watching him, to run away from them just to thwart me."

"I see. But tell me this—is the boy threatened by any unusual outside dangers that you know of?"

"I—I can't say definitely, sir," came hesitatingly. "Frankly, I don't know just what is going on outside the Home. I suspect spies—I suspect a lot. Possibly, unnerved as I am, I suspect too much. But with the boy running around in the open, it would be wisest, I'm sure, to guard against any possible contingency, and that would involve certain outside dangers, such as kidnapping, as well as the usual camp dangers, such as getting lost and physical accidents. Will you take the case, sir? I'll pay you well."

"But, Professor, don't you think that it would be wiser to make a deeper case of this and eliminate the *cause* of the dangers you fear? Why go on, with a sword virtually hanging over your head? You have your rights—and the law will protect you in maintaining them. Let me have the whole story—everything. I honestly feel that you will be thankful in the end if you do. That's my advice, sir."

"Then you wouldn't care to take the case as I have presented it?"

"I will—of course. But I'm more concerned with giving you all the help I can."

"Well," came the plea, "help me first as I have

outlined, sir. Maybe later we can go into the other angles."

"Very well," Mr. Trot accepted the decision, though plainly not pleased with it. "That being your final wish, I'll simply have to abide by it."

"Oh, thank you, sir! Thank you!" came gratefully.

Mr. Trot began thoughtfully pacing the room.

"Well, let me see now," he summed up. "What you want is someone to go to camp with the dwarf and keep a constant eye on him all the time he's there, both day and night, protecting him from both inside and outside dangers—and you've admitted that one of these outside dangers could be kidnapping."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, Professor, that's going to be quite a responsibility. However, it can be done. But instead of taking the case myself, I'm going to keep completely out of it, as you must remember that the dwarf already knows me. If I were to show up there he'd suspect my purpose immediately—a thing, you say, you want to avoid."

"Oh, yes!—that is very necessary, sir."

"Then my recommendation is," proceeded Mr. Trot, "that we turn the case over to two under-studies of mine—my own son, Dory, and the son of an old trusted friend, Poppy Ott. The boys already have done some excellent detective work

and so are deserving of your complete confidence. Frankly, Professor, I think they'll provide the ideal set-up. As boys themselves, they can make themselves a permanent part of the camp, which would be almost impossible with me. Don't you see how nicely that will work out?"

"Just how do you mean, sir?"

"Well, the dwarf will never suspect, when he sees them around, that they are hired guards. They'll be his companions, along with the other boys and leaders there. Of course, some special arrangements will have to be made with the Scout-master, but I'm certain that this can be handled quietly. It simply waits for you to approve the plan, Professor. If you do approve it, I'll have the boys on hand, in Scout uniforms, next Friday morning. The fee will be two hundred dollars. What do you say?"

"Well," came hesitatingly, "if you feel that the boys will prove dependable and show proper judgment—"

"That I guarantee, Professor. I know my boys! They aren't just kids, you know—they're young men. Dory's almost as big as I am."

The professor got out his wallet.

"Well, here is a hundred on account, sir. I'll pay the balance when the boys are relieved."

Mr. Trot went to his desk.

"Just a minute and I'll give you a receipt."

This having been made out and passed over, the

visitor hurried nervously off, Mr. Trot walking with him, with a few final words, to the front door.

A little later I set out afoot myself, the happiest Boy Scout, I think, who ever wore a uniform. Everything was working out perfectly. The dwarf would get his camping trip; for two weeks, on top of my other fun (and, oh, what fun it was going to be!), I'd have the chance to pal around with Poppy and Dory, enjoying their confidence and maybe doing a little detecting myself; and through it all possibly we'd learn the dwarf's secret.

At least that last was my own enthusiastic idea. Poppy and Dory themselves expected, for the present, just to do secret guard duty. With the dwarf himself in the dark about his parentage and the circumstances attending his commitment to the Home, they couldn't feel that there was much chance in camp of penetrating the mystery. That effort would come later, as they had promised me. But somehow I had the feeling that unexpected things, helping us, were going to happen right there in camp.

And plenty, let me tell you, did happen—not only in camp, but starting that very night, with me even ending up in a hospital. I'll hurry along and tell you about it just as fast as I can, picking up at the point where Dad and I came out of the bowling alley together at eleven-thirty.

“Well, station H-U-G-O, do you think you could

stay awake enough longer to enjoy a couple of nice fat juicy hamburgers with me?" he chumily inquired.

"I haven't done any yawning yet," I told him.

I had been to a late picture show, after coming down town, and this, and all the exciting things that had preceded it, had left me feeling pretty peppy.

The hamburgers downed, with coffee for Dad and pop for me, we set out for home. But instead of stopping when we got there, we kept on at full speed, having spotted a fire up ahead. The growing flames, as they roared up out of the treetops, lit up the whole countryside, bringing cars by the hundreds, one of which, as it came tearing at break-neck speed out of a crossroads, rammed into us broadside.

I hadn't noticed the onrushing car till Dad, realizing that a crash was inevitable and fearing glass cuts, screamed for me to duck. I had been peering ahead, trying to figure out whether the fire was a barn on the left-hand side of the winding road or the Home on the opposite side—for certainly it was one or the other. I was hoping, too, that it was the barn. Not that I cared anything special about the Home itself, but a fire there now would almost positively mean that a boy I had befriended had started it—a thing I didn't like to even think about.

Then that warning scream of Dad's and the

instantly-following crash came—after which I wasn't thinking about fires, dwarfs or anything else.

Little old Spinner, I want to tell you, for the first time in his life (and I hope for the last time!), was completely knocked out!

CHAPTER V

IN THE HOSPITAL

I WAS in bed when I woke up, with something over my eyes and wrapped all around my head. I tried to pull it off, wondering what in the deuce it was, but my hands were gently but firmly put down again.

Then I remembered! We had been hit by a car! But where was Dad?

"Dad!" I cried, struggling to get up. "Dad! Where are you? *Dad!*"

A hand, that I could never mistake, closed warmly and firmly over mine.

"I'm right here beside you, Son," came reassuringly. "Mother's here, too."

"Yes, darling," Mum gently took my other hand. "Your father and I are both here, right beside you. So don't be frightened. We'll be here just as long as you need us."

"But where am I?" I cried. "I can't see. Am I blind?"

"Oh, no, darling!—of course, you aren't," Mum hastily told me, her voice pained by the mere thought of it. "But you *did* get a bad bump on the head. Your head is all bandaged up—that's why you can't see."

"We were struck by a car, Son—do you remember that?" Dad anxiously tested me out.

"Yes, I remember," I told him slowly.

"Well, well, well," another voice jovially came in here, as though the speaker had just come into the room. "So you remember getting struck, eh? That's good. What's his temperature now, Miss Whittiker?"

"Ninety-nine, doctor," came the crisp reply.

"Good! And now, my boy, let's see if we can't get some peepholes in these bandages. There!" he concluded the work. "Isn't that a lot better?"

"Swell," I told him, blinking in the sudden light. "But who are you?"

"Who am I?" he laughed. "Oh, I'm the little bald-headed fellow who does the head-bandaging around here—a kind of clumsy fellow sometimes, but with good intentions. You can call me just Doc, if you wish. This rosy-cheeked young woman beside me is Miss Whittiker, your nurse. Of course, I don't have to tell you who these other people are."

He meant Mum and Dad.

I took a sharp look around then.

"So the old ambulance finally caught up with me, huh? What hospital is it?" I asked.

"The Madison General," the nurse told me, smoothing down my bed covers.

The doctor came up with something in a glass.

"It's to quiet your nerves, Hugo, and help put you to sleep."

Boy, if there's anything I hate it's medicine.

"What does it taste like?" I squinted at it.

"Weak lemonade," he told me.

So I took it and downed it.

"You should have said 'weaker' instead of just 'weak,' " I told him, gulping. "It didn't even have strength enough to tickle my Adam's apple on the way down."

"You're quite a little joker, aren't you?" he chuckled.

"You'd think so, doctor," put in Mum, "if you were around our house sometimes, when he gets wound up."

"Well," came gravely, "I think we'd better all go out and leave him now, as he'll be wanting to drop off shortly. You'll find a reception room just down the hall, Mrs. Frey, if you care to wait. But you musn't be in any way alarmed now—he's coming along splendidly. And you, Mr. Frey—you certainly came out of that accident luckily yourself, didn't you? I understand your car rolled completely over."

"Yes, it's a complete wreck," growled Dad. "That crazy driver's going to have a lawsuit on his hands, too. But tell me, Doctor," he lowered his voice, thinking, I guess, that I was half asleep already, "how long will the boy have to stay here?"

"Probably not more than a day or two, if every-

thing goes along as nicely as I anticipate. His cuts, of course, are a minor consideration. That skull injury is our main concern. It may require a little trephining. I'll know definitely in the morning. If you have work to do, Mr. Frey, I'd suggest that you go on home now, just as though nothing had happened, and try and get your usual rest. We'll take good care of your wife here, and this jolly little son of yours, too."

Left alone, I tried to remember, yawning, what it was the doctor had just said. Something about a day or two. A day or two would be—let me see now, I yawned again. To-day was Wednesday, or was it Thursday? If it was Thursday, two days would be Thursday and Friday. Yes, sure—Thursday and Friday. But what was it I was trying to figure out—I was too sleepy now even to remember that. It was something about Friday. Oh, yes!—the Scouts were going camping Friday morning—that was it.

"Hey, Dad!" I yipped, popping up. "Hey, Dad! Come back—quick!"

"What is it, Son?" he asked, anxiously bending over me, with Mum white-faced beside him.

"I can't stay here two days, Dad," I told him. "I want to go camping."

"Well, Son, I might just as well tell you right now and have it over with—there isn't going to be any camping for you to-morrow morning. So make up your mind to that. But you may get to

go a little later on, if you behave yourself here and give that bump of yours a chance to heal up."

"That crazy old car!" I cried. "Oh, gee! Maybe I won't get to go at all. I'll just have to stay here in an old hospital, and Tubby and the others will have all the fun. I was going to make a fake dragon, too. And—and—and—"

"Now, now, Son—take it easy," quieted Dad, as I ran into a snag. "And get that wild look out of your eyes."

"But there's something else, Dad. I'm trying to remember. It was something about camping. Oh, yes!—I remember now. It was that dwarf! *He* was going, too. And the fire!" my excitement grew. "Was it the Home, Dad? And did the dwarf do it?"

"What dwarf, Son? What are you talking about?—or do you know what you're talking about?"

"Of course, I know. It's the fire we were going to. Where was it, Dad?"

"Well, honestly, Son," he admitted, "I don't know. After that crash, all that interested me was to get an ambulance for you and then get your mother here with you. But let's not worry about that fire—that's all over with. Better things for you to think about will be the fun you're going to have when I drive you up to camp next week in a new car."

A new car!

"Do you mean it, Dad?" I cried excitedly. "Are you really going to buy a new car?—a brand-new one?"

"That's the plan, Son," he nodded, smiling.

"A new car! Hot diggety-dog!"

"Yes, Hugo," the doctor authoritatively came in here, "that's a pleasant thought for you to drop off on. A brand new car to take you home from here in a few days, and then on to camp. So let's see those eyes of yours close now. That's it; tha-at's it."

A new car! Oh, baby! But there was something else—if I could just remember better. It was something about camping. No, it wasn't, either—it was something about something else. If only I wasn't so blamed sleepy!

You readers know, of course, what I was trying to remember, having been put off the track by Dad's unexpected announcement of a new car. It was the fire, and the dwarf. But I was too drowsy then to figure it out, finally giving up altogether and completely dropping off.

I learned later on that the accident had occurred shortly after midnight. It was around one-thirty when I came to my senses in the hospital, and about two in the morning when Dad left for home in a rented car, Mum spending the balance of the night in a big easy chair in the near-by reception room.

But she was loyally back beside my bed when

I woke up at eight, later going out for her own breakfast while I ate mine.

"Can't I get up and sit in a chair?" I begged the nurse. "Gosh, I hate to lay in bed. I don't feel sick—honest I don't."

"Well, we'll see what the doctor says when he arrives."

During the morning I was taken into what was called the X-ray laboratory where pictures were taken of my head wound, the doctor later showing these to me, telling me thankfully how very narrowly I had escaped a serious skull fracture.

"There's no doubt now about that camping trip, Hugo," he promised me, in conclusion. "We might even get you out of here by Monday morning. And now, Miss Whittiker, suppose you blanket him in one of our wheel chairs and let him amuse himself with that for an hour or two. He can pretend that he's an old man with gouty legs."

"What's that?" I piped, in a feeble weak voice. "What's that you just said about my gouty legs?—you young whippersnapper! Is that any way to talk to an old mountaineer like I be, who killed three b'ars with one shot and kicked a panther to death behind at the same time—to say nothin' of spittin' in a buzzard's eye and drownin' it. Old Mow-'em-down Ike! That's me, neighbor!"

"I'm not so sure," the doctor again spoke to the

nurse, "that a straight-jacket wouldn't be better for him. But we'll try the wheel chair this morning."

Dad came in at ten-thirty finding me playing wheel-chair tag with another boy patient in the big reception room.

"Say!" he stared. "I thought you were an invalid here. Does the doctor know you're tearing around out here?"

"Sure thing," I told him. "And, Dad!—that bump on my head isn't anything," I made light of it. "The doctor thought last night that I had a cracked skull, but there's no sign of it in the X-ray pictures that they took of me this morning. They're just keeping me here to make sure that infection doesn't set in."

"Well, you certainly seem to be enjoying yourself here," he grinned. "But where's Mother?"

"She went out to buy me some new pajamas."

"What do you think about her going home?" he then earnestly asked. "There can't be much rest for her around here—and you certainly don't seem in any need of her."

"It's o-k by me," I told him. "I'm having a lot of fun here now. I had a swell breakfast, too—just like at home. And this noon I'm going to have ice cream. The nurse says I can have all I can eat."

"Humph! She may alter that privilege when

she gets better acquainted with your appetite. But I'll have to be running along. Tell Mother to phone me, or come over, if she wants a ride home. And for Pete's sake don't tip over in that baby buggy of yours and break your neck here. I've had enough bad news for one week."

CHAPTER VI

THE CHINA ELEPHANT

I WAS back in my room reading a book from the hospital library when Mum got back.

"Dad was just here," I told her. "He said for you to give him a ring, or come over, if you wanted to go home."

"What do you think about my going home, Hugo?" she gently asked.

"Well, I think you ought to, Mum," I waggled. "In fact, I want you to go. I've been thinking about it. You know, a fellow doesn't get a chance to go to a hospital very often, and when the chance comes he's got to cash in on it."

"Meaning what?" she quizzed.

"Well, take Tubby last fall, when he had his appendix cut out. Boy, he thought he was big, getting baskets of fruit and boxes of candy and books—yes, and flowers even! I don't want any flowers—but you can get a lot of candy and books for me if you'll just run around the neighborhood, when you get home, and spread the news."

"Why, Hugo Frey!" she cried. "I never dreamed that you could be so mercenary. Why, I'm almost ashamed of you."

"And, Mum!—listen!" I hurried on. "Here's a good way to work it: You see, I've just been reading this Jerry Todd book here, and there's a whole bunch of them in the series. So when Tubby comes in, and starts quizzing around about what I'd like, you just drop the hint that I'd like the first Jerry Todd book. Then when Clarence Goodrich comes in, ditto-ditto—only tell *him* I want book number two. In that way I'll get the whole series—and maybe some candy and fruit on top of it."

"Did you hear that?" Mum disgustedly asked the nurse, who had come in with some milk for me. "He's been trying to get me to go home and wheedle his chums into sending him a whole library, with candy and fruit thrown in. Did you ever before hear of anything more brazen?"

"Well, we see and hear some very amusing things around here," lightly laughed the nurse. "And I imagine his chums will enjoy sending him or bringing him a little present. It's customary."

"Which is all right, of course," Mum stiffly agreed. "But he actually expects me to go home and *hint*. Well, I'm going home, all right—but there'll be no hinting."

"How about letting me phone to the gang?" I asked the nurse.

"Oh, Hugo!" Mum cut in. "Will you *please* stop that selfish talk? I'm ashamed of you. But if you're sure you won't mind, I think I'll go over

to the office now and have your father drive me home."

"Sure thing—the sooner the better," I grinned. "And when you see the Scouts, Mum, spread it on! Tell them after the crash, how I staggered around, all cut up, but saying: 'Never mind me, men! Help my father!' You know, Mum—make it sound heroic. I ought to clean up plenty then, for just see what Lindbergh got when he flew the Atlantic."

"Good-by," said Mum, with a final disapproving look at me—and out she stalked.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself—to tease your mother that way," the nurse laughed.

"Oh, she likes it. She knows I'm joking. But, gee, I hope the fellows *will* remember me a little bit. It's always nice to know that people like you and are sorry when you get hurt, isn't it, Miss Whittiker?"

"It certainly is," she warmly agreed.

"And a little squirt like me—it's so easy to be overlooked, too. Do you think the Scouts will bring me a book?" I asked wistfully.

"If they don't," she said tersely, "I think they better hand in their Scout badges."

"Here he is," a familiar boisterous voice here came from the doorway. And when I turned, there stood Poppy and Dory, both grinning.

"Gee, I was just hoping that someone would come to see me," I told them, beaming, when they

came in. "I never expected you fellows, though."

"Well, don't start getting puffed up about it," grunted Dory. "We didn't come here purposely to see you. We have business here. But, say!—that shirt-tail that you've got wrapped around your face sure improves your looks a lot, doesn't it?"

"It'd take more than a shirt-tail," I fired back at him, "to improve your looks. You ought to bury that pan of yours in somebody's garden and start raising skunk cabbages from it."

He clutched his head.

"Oh, oh! Licked again in the first round. But how are you, runt? We saw in the morning paper that you had tried to stop a truck with your head—or was it a telephone pole you butted over?"

"I didn't knock it clear over," I corrected, in fun. "I just bent it. But I'll be all right as soon as I get the rest of the splinters picked out of my skull. For what's an old telephone, more or less, to me? Poof! When I'm feeling good I pick my teeth with 'em."

Poppy came out then with a box of candy.

"We didn't know whether you could eat it or not, but we thought it wouldn't do any harm to bring it along."

One box already! Well, that sure was promising.

"Thanks a lot, Poppy," I feelingly told him. "And you, too, Dory."

"Why thank me?" he grunted. "I don't waste candy on little duds like you. I wouldn't mind, though, buying some for that little blond that was just in here. I think I'll take a walk down the corridor—maybe she's out there waiting for me."

"That candy was a present from us both, Hugo," Poppy told me, when we were alone. "Don't let him kid you. He tries to make you think that he thinks you're a pain in the neck, but the very fact that he razzes you that way proves that he likes you. I suppose you've heard about the fire."

The fire! Gee-miny crickets! How could I have forgotten it all this time? But I had.

"Was it the Home?" I eagerly asked.

"Yes," Poppy nodded. "It burned to the ground last night."

"Oh, gee!" I cried, more hurt inside than I had been in years. I had befriended the boy—I had tried to help him—and then to have him do a destructive malicious thing like this! "Why did he do it, Poppy? He had gotten permission to go. Do you think he's crazy?—like the Professor said?"

"Who are you talking about?" Poppy eyed me. "The dwarf?"

"Yes. He started the fire, didn't he?"

"No, Hugo, he had nothing to do with it—even though he did threaten something like that. The poor kid! He lost all his stuffed birds, too. But

he and the other kids were lucky to get out alive, I guess—for they were all carried out in their night clothes. He's staying with us now."

"You mean—at Dory's house?"

"Yes. Dory and I were just over to the Home seeing if we could salvage some papers or records from the ruins. But everything's in ashes. And with the Professor gone, too, about our only hope now is the old nurse here. Have you heard how she is this afternoon?"

"I don't know who you're talking about, Poppy," I told him.

"But you knew, didn't you," he quickly looked at me, "that Professor Turner is dead?"

"You mean—murdered?" I asked, horrified.

"Oh, no!—not that! But I see I better tell you the whole story. Well, about ten-thirty last night the lights went out over there—fuse trouble or a burned-out transformer or something. Anyway, the place was left without lights. Wanting to get around, to see about some things, an elderly nurse named Miss Cratch resurrected an old kerosene lamp which exploded on her."

"And that's what started the fire, huh?"

"That's how it started. Unable to put it out herself, she ran for the Professor and between them, with the place in flames and doomed, they managed to get the children all out. But either the Professor didn't understand this, or had something else in mind in there that he wanted, for he

went back—and probably was suffocated or trapped, as he never came out again. The old nurse may die, too—she's here in the hospital somewhere now, terribly burned. But the doctors have told us that we can talk with her at two-thirty. We're hoping that she can tell us who the dwarf is or at least give us a clew of some kind, as she's been working there for more than twenty years. But I better go now and hunt up Dory—if the blonds around here haven't already put him out on his ear. He's plenty gabby when he's around girls."

"But, Poppy!—just a minute!" I held him. "Did you say the dwarf is going to live with you and Dory?"

"Yes—till we establish his identity, at least. Then, of course, he'll be turned over to his own people."

"What if they won't take him?"

"Well, that's their problem."

"They might take him and murder him, Poppy."

"Oh, no! Nobody would do a thing like that."

"But somebody has been hiding him out there for years."

"Yes, and probably paying well to keep him there. If he was just in the way, he could have been bumped off years ago and all that money spent on him saved. Of course, his father may have hidden him there to foil someone else. I don't pretend to understand it now one way or

the other, but I can't make myself believe that the dwarf himself is in any particular danger. The Professor seemed to think that *he* was—and maybe he was. But he's gone now, so that's that. Anyway, why puzzle over it now and stir up a lot of imaginative theories when in another hour maybe we'll have the true answer to the riddle from the nurse."

"Gee, I wish I could go with you," I told him, when he got up to leave.

"And why not?" he quickly accepted the suggestion. "It's really your case—it was you who brought it to us. So come on, if your nurse will let you."

I saw her just outside the door, with Dory grinning sheepishly behind her, and getting her permission, I went on with the two to the room on the floor above, where the aged nurse, on whose memory and knowledge of the Home so much now depended, lay dying.

I won't attempt to tell you how she looked in her bandages or how she suffered—the poor woman!—it was all so pitiful that I tried, when we came out a few minutes later, to completely crowd it out of my mind. Nor did we have much more actual knowledge about the dwarf when we came out than when we went in.

All she could tell us was that the baby had been brought there, in the dead of night, by a man who

had left thousands of dollars with Professor Turner for the child's future care. No written record had been made of the transaction—who the man was or why he had brought his son there (if the baby was his own), the nurse hadn't the slightest idea. In the end, when pressed for some small bit of information about the man—some odd thing he had said or done that might aid in his detection—she mentioned a small inexpensive white china elephant that the Professor had kept on his desk for a paper weight. The man, in leaving, had pocketed it, saying, with a laugh, that he knew somebody who would get more pleasure out of owning it than anybody there would.

And that was all. We simply knew that the dwarf had been brought at night to the Home by some probably very wealthy man, who, after appropriating a small white china elephant—a desk piece—had said that he (to use his exact words as given to us) “knew somebody who would get more pleasure out of owning it than anybody there would.”

“Well,” grunted Dory, in his characteristic way, when he and Poppy waited at the elevator to go down, “I guess we won't be able to do much on that clew overnight. A china elephant! If it had been a china monkey I would have started looking for clews in the Frey family. As it is, I think we better go on camping with the dwarf, as planned,

and trust to luck that something will turn up later on—the kid's father maybe. What do you think, Poppy?"

"That suits me," Poppy agreed. "Certainly I can't imagine where we're going to start looking for a small white china elephant."

"Aw!" growled Dory, with a deprecating gesture. "I don't know whether that's a clew or not. Maybe the man just carried it off for a gag, and later threw it in the river."

"Yes, that's possible," thoughtfully nodded Poppy. "It's possible, too, that he gave it to somebody he knew, who may still have it."

"All right, all right," Dory gave in. "Let's call it a clew then—or better still, let's call it chance number one. As I see it now we've got three chances of solving the dwarf's mystery. The elephant is chance number one; the possibility of the father showing up is chance number two; possible kidnappers at the lake is chance number three. And, boy, I hope we do get a crack at some kidnappers up there! Boy, I'd like to have a good fight with someone right now. Gr-r-r! For what do you suppose that blond just told me!"

"What?" grinned Poppy.

"She said she's getting married next Wednesday."

CHAPTER VII

AT DRAGON LAKE

MUM phoned twice that afternoon, finally coming in on the five-thirty bus for a last look at me for the day, leaving with Dad at six-thirty in a brand new four-door Chevrolet. They made a special trip around the block just so I could see the new car from my window—and, boy, it sure was a honey! Dad briefly reported, too, that the intended lawsuit had been called off, the other man having sensibly agreed to settle out of court. I never heard exactly, but I think Dad got around five hundred dollars in cash.

Also that afternoon seven of the Scouts came—my double cousin, Milo Frey (and, boy, do I like *him*—with that white topknot of his and his clear friendly blue eyes—one of the swellest and cleanest Scouts, I want to tell you, who ever wore a uniform); Clarence Goodrich, our tallest and oldest Scout, with a grin (and I'm not kidding, either!) that actually goes back behind his ears; Donnie Rumpf, another tall flaxen-haired Scout; Nestor Smithback, usually called Ned, black-haired and black-eyed (and, oh, my!—so popular with the girls!); Bobbie Crump, whose father

owns the printing plant where Dad works; Al Nottestad, Clarence's tag-around; and Eddie Jensen, another towhead Milo's size. Then after supper still three more came—the two Jarlsberg brothers, Kennie and Murphy, as we call the oldest one, and Richard (Dill Pickle) Dillon, a little runt like me, who lives with his grandparents.

But what I appreciated far more than the books and candy that they brought me was the way they all felt about me. They came in kind of anxious-eyed, but began grinning all over, as boys do, when they found I was still in one serviceable piece. It wasn't going to be half as much fun going camping without me, they all declared, and they even suggested (though pretty weakly!) that they postpone the trip till I was able to accompany them. But I told them to go on without me, as planned, and have all the fun they could right from the start—I might join them a lot sooner than they anticipated, I said.

Dill Pickle, I could see, had something up his sleeve, for he kept watching my window and giggling in that crazy way of his—and then finally, to his great joy, in through the window came one of those gurgling dying-calf bugle calls that I could never mistake. They had brought Tubby Mundy along purposely to serenade me with his trombone—but someone down there (a cop probably) soon put a stop to that, in the patients' behalf. It was a lot of fun, though—and, gee!—it made me feel

good. There isn't anything better, I want to tell you, than having friends like that.

Mr. Quickley sent word that he was planning to stop in with the balance of the troop the following morning, as the fellows all wanted to see me before leaving. At seven, too, Poppy phoned, inquiring how I was, but having nothing new himself to report. Then, shortly after seven, Miss Whittiker told me quietly that the old Home nurse above had passed on—which was a blessing. That left me with a lot to think about—the dwarf himself, the Professor's fear and agitation that night, and now this final clew—the china elephant.

Money and property could logically have been the motive for the dwarf's concealment there. I could even comprehend how an own father (of a sort) could put a son away that way. But that fright of the Professor's was beyond me—and yet I knew it was genuine, too—not just imagination or nerves. He had talked of getting a bullet through his head. But why should anyone involved in the mystery want to murder *him*? He had just been hired to hide the dwarf and care for him. Were we to believe that while the Professor had been watching over the dwarf inside, some malicious person outside had in turn been spying on him? It certainly would seem so. And now that the Home and its threatened owner were gone, and the dwarf in outside hands, what would this unknown outside person be liable to do?

Most puzzling of all was the elephant clew. That sure was baffling. A man had come with a baby in the dead of night, with thousands of dollars for the child's future care—which must have been a tense breathless transaction. I trembled myself just thinking about it. And yet the mysterious visitor, who should have been the most tense of all, had lightly (even laughingly) picked up an inexpensive desk trinket, taking it off with him.

Well, I finally gave up, maybe some day we'd know the answer to the riddle, but it was far too complicated for me now. Just as soon as possible, though, I wanted to join Poppy and Dory in camp, to keep just as close with them on the case as I could. And what a story I'd have to tell if we did have to fight off kidnappers. Just think of a little runt like me doing a daring thing like that. Oh, boy! Or maybe, instead of just driving them off, we'd fight them into complete surrender, thus learning their part in the riddle and through them possibly clearing it all up.

At eight the last of the visitors left, the hospital then quieting down for the night. But it wasn't like home where things get dead quiet. Nurses were up all night long, constantly coming and going. But what kept me awake more than the repassing footsteps and hall whispers was a crazy near-by tower clock. Not satisfied with striking the hour and half hour, it got in an extra rasping

metallic crack each fifteen minutes. Finally, though, I got it out of my thoughts, along with the riddle of the Hidden Dwarf and everything else, and peacefully dropped off.

Five car loads of excited bubbling Boy Scouts left our official headquarters the following morning at seven-thirty, two of the loads stopping on their way through Madison to say good-by to me, as Mr. Quickley had promised. Boy, were they a lively crazy mob as they tumbled in on me. But Mr. Quickley soon herded them out again, telling them to wait below in the cars and not wander off for candy or ice-cream cones.

"And when do you think you'll show up, Hugo?" he asked me. "I hear you're coming—and I sure hope it'll be soon."

"How far is it?" I asked in return.

"About a hundred miles."

"Well, if I get out of here Monday morning, as the doctor has promised, I ought to be there by noon," I figured.

"Good! I'll be looking for you. What would you like for dinner?"

"Hamburgers 'with,' " I yipped.

"Very well, hamburgers 'with' it shall be—and probably a lot better cooked than we ever had them before, as we're going to have a regular cook this trip."

"Honest? Who?" I quickly asked.

"An old friend of mine—George Robbins—

who used to be in the bakery business here. As long as we're going to have a hotel stove to cook on this year, I thought we'd get an experienced cook and do the job up right. You know, Hugo, some of our camp cooking in the past wasn't so hot."

"Oh, but that was part of the fun," I quickly told him.

"Well," was his earnest reply, "it's never fun for the man in charge when tummy aches start popping up—knowing, too, that it was improperly prepared food that caused it. Mothers don't like to hear of that when the boys get home. But there'll be none of that this year—I hope! There shouldn't be with old George on the job. He's doing it just to help you boys—so you'll want to be pretty nice to him."

"Is he going to wash the dishes, too?" I eagerly asked.

"Now, now, Hugo!" came reprovngly. "I never expected a lazy remark like that from you. Of course, he isn't going to wash the dishes—or peel the potatoes, either. There'll still be plenty of kitchen work for you boys to do."

"Gee, I hate washing dishes, Mr. Quickley—especially those old kettles," I grimaced.

"But you don't hate eating what comes out of the kettles."

"Oh, no!—that's fun."

"Well, then try and make fun out of the dish-

washing, too," was his dry advice. "Even though you're laid up now you're going to get your share of it. I'm glad, though, that your accident wasn't any worse. Mrs. Quickley is coming in to see you to-morrow. By the way, that dwarf you were telling her about is going camping with us. Did you know that?"

"I knew he wanted to," I guardedly replied. "He said he'd pay double."

"Ordinarily I don't like to take boys along who aren't Scouts or about to be. But it's different with him—the poor lad! Of course, you know about him being burned out the other night."

"Yes, sir," I nodded.

"A couple of his friends are driving him up—a couple of older Scouts, as I understand it. Well, so-long, Scout."

Mrs. Mundy phoned while Mr. Quickley was on his way out, asking me if Tubby was still there—only, of course, *she* didn't call him Tubby. Mr. Mundy, who was taking a load up, had gone off without his wallet, she rattled on in her wheezing excitable way, which contained his driver's license—and she had just discovered, too, that Horace had hidden his toothbrush and rubbers under the ice box. She was fearfully upset when I told her that the cars had all gone, fearing pneumonia for Horace, without his rubbers, and the penitentiary for Mr. Mundy, without his driver's license.

The funny part is, too, that Mr. Mundy

smacked into a half-grown pig on the way up, crippling it so it could hardly walk. To appease the angry owner, he offered to buy it, discovering then that his wallet was at home—so it fell on Tubby and the other Scouts in the car to put up the necessary money. It took every penny they had.

Of the pig and its tragic fate I'll tell you more later. But I think I'll take advantage of the lull here to tell you a little bit more about Poppy, and how he and Dory were brought together, as they, too, stopped in for a minute or two around ten.

I got the whole story from Poppy himself one rainy night in camp, the huge rock piles there, with the lightning playing on them and the thunder crashing over them, reminding him, I guess, of his native mountains down in Tennessee.

His early home hadn't been much, he began quietly, but his mother had been swell, making up in love for the things the home lacked, and telling him, as he grew up, to be truthful honorable and industrious. His own father, she had hesitatingly pointed out to him, was a good example of what shiftlessness could do for a man.

Practically the only money they had to live on was the small amount that she earned herself over a wash tub, while Mr. Ott for the most part lazily sat around reading detective stories, thinking foolishly that all he needed was the opportunity to become a great detective himself. Evidently he

wanted Poppy to be a detective, too, for when the new baby came it was given the promising name of Nicholas Carter Sherlock Holmes Ott, a pop-corn peddling job of Poppy's later leading to that nickname.

Mrs. Ott herself had wanted to name the new baby Davey, but meekly gave in to her husband, patiently going on with her work as the little boy grew up, and then finally calling him to her sick-bed one night for a last loving farewell.

The home quickly broke up after that, Mr. Ott finally starting out with Poppy in a rickety covered wagon. In the summer they went north and in the winter they went south, pitching camp along the roadside wherever the fancy struck them. Poppy at first was too deeply grieved over his loss to care much where he went or what became of him. But one day he got sick of it. His mother never would approve of a lazy shiftless life like this, he knew. So he flatly told his father that he was going to settle down some place where he could resume his schooling as his mother would want him to do, and make something of himself.

What he did, even more than that, in the little home that he and his father set up in Tutter, Illinois, was to prevail upon his father to go into the stilt manufacturing business there, Mr. Ott strangely changing almost overnight from an aimless rover into one of the little town's most respected and shrewdest business men—but with still

some of the old detective yearnings in the back of his head, as was learned later!

A boyhood chum of his, Mr. Harrison Trot, had made a big name for himself in the detective field. This man, too, had a young son. So why not get these two boys together, Mr. Ott schemed secretly, interest them in detecting, and then get them started as real detectives? The name Nicholas Carter Sherlock Holmes Ott might be made to bring honors to the family yet!

Well, the two fathers, with kindred desires, did bring the two sons together—and with exactly the results that they had hoped for. I won't tell you any more about that here, but when Poppy's book, "THE MONKEY'S PAW," comes out (if it isn't already out by the time you get this book) you just go ahead and read it, and you'll get the whole amazing story there.

I happened to be at the window that morning when Poppy and Dory drove up in a small sky-blue roadster, the dwarf sandwiched in between them, and all three wearing brand new Scout uniforms.

"Hey, where did you get that new uniform?" I went at the dwarf, when he came in hat in hand, with that repressed little smile of his.

"I bought it," he proudly posed.

"Are you going to join the Scouts?" I eagerly asked.

"I've already joined, Spinner," he beamed. "How do I look?"

"Swell," I told him.

"It sure was a lucky break for me," he warmly added, "when I met you in the woods that day."

"I'm just as glad over the meeting as you are," I returned.

"And I wanted to claw your eyes out at first! I sure was an old crab, wasn't I? But you know," he earnestly went on, "I never had had any real pals before, to have fun with—I had mostly been left to myself, to wonder who I really was and what I was being cheated out of. Thoughts like that eat into a fellow and make him mean. I hated everybody, I guess, myself included. But I'm sorry now for all the mean things I said about Professor Turner."

"Your old nurse died, too," I told him. "Had you heard about it?"

"Miss Cratch?—yes, Poppy told me."

"What do you think of Poppy?"

"I think he's swell—and Dory, too. Gee, things sure have changed for me. And it all came about through you. I'll never be able to thank you enough."

"Did the boys tell you what happened the night I was at their house?" I guardedly asked.

"About the Professor coming there to hire somebody to guard me?—oh, sure," he nodded.

"I know why they're going along. And I'm glad that someone finally has offered to help me find out who I really am. Mr. Trot is going to find out if the Professor had a special bank account in my name—and if there is one, and I can get the money, I'm going to divide it with you, Spinner."

"Yes, you are not," I scoffed. "We'll take the money and do some doctoring for you. Or if you get left on the money, we'll find some way of doing the doctoring, anyway. So this may be just a step for you, Rodger. First you get a little fun, and next you get rid of your pains. A fellow's luck, you know, can't be bad always. And yours certainly has changed—if I know anything."

"Yes, but what's ahead of me, Spinner?" he asked, frightened now. "What do you think? Do you think I'm liable to be bumped off or kidnapped or hidden away some place else?"

"Not with old Dory on the job," I staunchly declared. "That boy could lick his weight in wildcats. You couldn't possibly be in safer hands. I have the feeling, too, that when you come back to Madison you'll know the whole story about yourself, and any danger that may have been hanging over you will by then have been wiped out. You may even be a boy millionaire—who knows?"

"You sure make it sound swell, Spinner," he brightened. "But wasn't that accident a tough break for *you*, though! There you were going camping, with me wanting to go—and now I'm

going and you can't. Things sure do change quickly sometimes."

"Well, don't you worry about me," I confidently replied. "You just go right on yourself, saving me a bunk in the bunch where we can have the most fun nights, and I'll be along almost before you have a chance to miss me."

Poppy and Dory had stopped to chin with a couple of nurses in the corridor, but came in now for a few words themselves, Dory razzing me as usual, after which they all hurried off.

Mum found me glumly at the window when she came in at three that afternoon. But by nightfall I was resigned to the weary wait, Saturday passing more quickly, and then, after Sunday (oh, boy!—oh, boy!—oh, boy!), I was out again and off to camp myself.

I wasn't to take part in any violent games or tire myself out on long hikes, I had been firmly told in leaving. And every third day I was to visit some good doctor in the vicinity and have my wound dressed. If I carried out these instructions, and used a little good judgment myself, I'd be perfectly all right, I had been told.

It was a swell ride up there in the new car, with the big forest coming finally into sight, and then, in the heart of it, with towering rock piles all about it, the little lake itself.

There had been a lot of hard climbing the last mile or two, the winding road getting rockier and

rockier. It would almost seem that we were climbing a small mountain. Then from the crest had come that breath-taking view of what seemed to us at first to be a mirror instead of an actual body of water—so still was the surface and so perfect the shore-line reflections.

"Dad," I told him, impressed, "you're looking at the oldest thing in the world."

"What do you mean?—that lake?"

"No—these rock piles. They're all granite rocks that were heaved up here when the earth's crust was cooling, millions of years ago. They're so hard that the great glacier that came down through here couldn't even mar them, let alone move them. It's all in our schoolbooks. But I never dreamed that the rock piles would be so high. Boy, will it be fun climbing around here! And just imagine!—the Indians used to believe that that pretty little lake down there had dragons in it! Did you ever see a prettier or more peaceful lake, Dad?"

"It's a honey, all right," he agreed. "But where's that old hotel you've been telling me about? All I can see is rocks and trees."

A faint gurgling toot here came up from below.

"I guess that tells you where the camp is," I laughed. "We can't see it, but it's down that way somewhere. And for Pete's sake hurry, Dad!—for that may be Tubby calling the Scouts to dinner."

CHAPTER VIII

TUBBY'S FRIGHT

TWISTING and turning, the forest dropping behind us now and nothing but bare heaped-up rocks around us, some as big as houses, we came finally to a rich ferny flat below. Here we struck more trees—great big fellows this time that evidently had taken root there hundreds of years ago—through which at last we caught sight of the old two-story hotel that Mr. Quickley had so luckily secured for our use while there.

Stretched out along the sandy lake shore, with its weather-beaten front porch and sagging roof, it sure looked like an old timer, all right. But that was all the better, I quickly told myself. The fun we could have in a place like that—and with those towering rock piles right at our back door! Oh, boy! I couldn't get my stuff out of the car fast enough.

Dill Pickle first caught sight of us from an upper window.

"Hey, fellows!" he screeched to the others. "Here they are now."

Which brought a dozen more heads popping out.

"Hi, Spinner!" Bobbie Crump waved wildly.

"Welcome to Hotel Crazy-House. Whoopee!"

"Yes," another waved, like a maniac, "come on in and pick out your padded cell. Yippee!"

"Save me! Save me!" still another gurgled, clutching himself around the windpipe. "He's got me by the neck! Help! Help!"

The crazy eggs!

Then out came Tubby's fat face.

"Hey, Spinner!" he eagerly beckoned, as the others all popped back to come down. "Come on up and let me out. They've got me locked in—the big bums! They took my pants, too."

Boy, I thought the old hotel would fold up right then and there, the way that crazy mob tumbled down the stairs and out the back way, the screen door banging behind them.

Dill Pickle got to me first.

"Take a look, Spinner!" he giggled, pointing.

They had hung Tubby's stuffed uniform in a tree!

Clarence slyly pulled something out of his pocket as he came up.

"Look, Spinner," he grinned.

"What is it?" I asked.

"The mouthpiece of Tubby's trombone."

"I've got the bell hid under my bed," Dill Pickle giggled.

"I've got a piece, too," Donnie Rumpf chimed in.

"But what happened to poor Tubby?" I asked.

"Oh, that crazy egg!" growled Clarence.

"Yes," put in Dill Pickle, "he doesn't know a milk truck from your new Chevie, Spinner."

"I always told you he was petrified from the neck up," put in Donnie.

"Gee!" giggled Dill Pickle, looking up. "I wish we could get some hornets and put in there now—with all that nice bare surface."

"Yes, maybe something like that would wake him up," growled Clarence. "And did *we* ever come running, like a lot of saps! You see, Spinner, he was supposed to watch for you, while we were up in the rocks. And, boy, is it fun up there! Pretty soon we heard the expected toot. But when we got there, expecting to find you and your new Chevie, he said he'd just been practicing on the milk truck that brings us our milk."

"And then did we practice on *him*," Dill Pickle went off into another giggle.

I turned to Dad.

"That must have been the toot we heard," I laughed.

Mr. Quickley came up then, in his brisk straight-shouldered way.

"I'm glad to see you, Hugo," he warmly greeted, with outstretched hand. "And you, too, Mr. Frey. But whose uniform is that hanging over there in that tree?" came the sharp inquiry.

Dill Pickle quickly pulled his face down.

"It isn't mine," he shook his head.

"I don't think it's mine, either," said Clarence, looking himself over. "Nope—I've got mine on," he grinned.

"It's mine, Mr. Quickley," Tubby called down.

"How did it get up there in that tree?" sharply asked Mr. Quickley. "That's no way to treat a Scout uniform. Come down here and get it down—or it'll be the hot-box for you, Horace. And, Nestor!—how about helping Hugo upstairs with his things. Remember, too, fellows—all of you in that room—no rough stuff with Hugo to-night—and that's final. But you're going to stay and have dinner with us, aren't you, Mr. Frey?"

"No, I think I better start back right away," declined Dad, going on to his car. "I have a lot of things to do this afternoon."

"Well, don't you worry about Hugo. We'll take good care of him. And thanks a lot for bringing him up."

I followed Dad to the car to say good-by.

"You *will* be careful, won't you, Son?" he earnestly asked.

"Oh, sure," I promised.

"By the way," he reached for his wallet, "maybe I better leave you some money for the doctor. Here, take these fives."

I counted them.

"Gee!—four! What if I lose them?"

"Mr. Quickley will take care of them for you.

If you need anything more, or if anything happens, phone."

"Hey, Dad!—just a minute," I stopped him.

"Yes?"

I reached in and squeezed his hand.

"That's all," I grinned.

"Stout fella," he said softly in return.

Then off he went.

"Can't you have any fun at all?" Ned asked me, with a disappointed air, as we gathered up my things to carry in.

"Oh, sure!" I quickly told him. "But I've got to be careful, too."

We met Dory coming out.

"Well, well, well," he quickened his step toward me, with outstretched hand. "If it isn't old Pain-in-the-neck Frey himself! I suppose you're surprised to find me still here, huh?" he winked.

"How come?" I asked, winking back.

"Oh," came casually, for the benefit of any Scouts who might be listening, "Poppy and I liked it so well here that we decided to stay. Your Scoutmaster said we could if we paid our board."

I dropped back.

"Where's Rodger?" I asked, in a quick low voice.

"Out after birds."

"And Poppy, too, huh?"

"Yah—about a hundred yards behind him."

"Anything happen yet?" I further asked.

"Not a thing. But mum's the word, Hugo."

"Mum it is," I promised, running on.

Ned, ahead, was trying to wheedle the white-aproned cook, a squat skimpy-haired little man, into letting us in the back door, which had been latched after that crazy outpour.

"Please, Cookie, just this once. Be a pal!"

"Why this once?" came back sharply. "You know your orders. You're supposed to go in and out the front door—not here. So go on around and come in that way, if you want in. This is no boulevard through here."

"But I want you to meet Spinner, Cookie," persisted Ned. "Please."

"Oh, all right," the cook finally consented. "Come on in then—if you must. I suppose I'll have to make an exception in this case. But don't let any more flies in than you can help."

It wasn't a very big kitchen, with a sink and dish-washing rack along the windowed side, a long table opposite for serving, cupboards at one end, and directly in front of us, as we came in, the huge old-fashioned wood stove that had been left there. It sure was a whopper, all right, now throwing out heat like a furnace, the whole top covered with sizzling frying pans and steaming kettles.

"This is Mr. George Robbins—or Cookie, as we call him, Spinner," Ned briskly introduced.

"And, Cookie, this is our troop gab-box, the one and only Spinner Frey—who bats down telephone poles with his head, ties Scout knots with his toes and hangs out his tongue on Sunday for a red necktie."

"Humph!" the cook raised his steamed glasses for a better look at me. "Where's the rest of him?"

"This is all there is," I told him, grinning.

"There certainly isn't much," he grunted back.

"Well, you never heard of anybody packing diamonds in an auto crate, did you? Valuable things always come in small packages."

"Sure, like liver pills," he grunted, going back to his job at the stove.

It was easy enough to tell what he was cooking there.

"Um!" I stopped for a heavenly sniff. "Oh, boy! Mr. Quickley didn't forget his promise, did he?"

Gene Kuhl elbowed by with a towering plate of buttered bread for the table that he and Kennie were setting on the front porch.

"Go on and get out of here, Smithback—you aren't working in the kitchen to-day. And that means you, too, Spinner," we were roughly told. "Put 'em out, Cookie."

"Yes," the cook busily waved us off with his hamburger turner. "Get on out of here with your

stuff, and see that the rest of the day you keep out, too—unless your Scoutmaster puts you to work in here.”

“Boy, he sure is plenty crabby, isn’t he?” I told Ned, as we went on into the big play room that I had been told about, where I noticed a great yawning fireplace, and then up a wide flight of stairs.

“Oh, he’s all right,” Ned assured, with an easy shrug. “We’d be running through there all day long, I suppose, if he didn’t stop us—and that wouldn’t be so hot for him, with all the work he has to do. We’re pretty lucky to have him. And, boy, can he cook! He fills the plates in the kitchen—the table-setters bring them out to us on the porch—and when I say fill I mean fill.”

“Heaped up, huh?”

“*And*, how! No little dabs of this and that—or no crazy salmon and such truck, either—oof! Just good old mashed potatoes and gravy, baked beans, soup and macaroni. Yesterday Tubby ate so much we had to take him out and roll him.”

“Don’t you believe him, Spinner,” Tubby sullenly spoke for himself through the transom over his door, as we passed down the upper hall. “I don’t eat any more here than the others. But because I’m fat they say I do. But go on and turn the key down there,” he begged, “so I can get out and get my pants. For you heard what Mr. Quickley said. Gosh, I don’t want to go through the hot-box!”

"All right, fellows," Gene loudly called below. "Dinner's all ready. So come on, Tubby, and give your usual sour toot."

"Yes, Horace," Mr. Quickley called up the stairs. "Hurry down, and bugle the boys in."

"But I can't—I'm locked in," Tubby squawked back, through the transom.

Which brought Mr. Quickley up on the bound, Ned quickly pulling me around a bend in the hall.

"Well, here you are," he threw open a door at the extreme end.

On either side, as we went in, was a double bunk, upper and lower, with a double window in front looking out, over the low porch roof, onto the lake.

"This is your lower here, Spinner," he dropped down on it. "I sleep above and Bobbie and Dill Pickle have the two over there."

"Boy, that's a good bunch," I told him, checking off the names in my mind. "But where do we put our stuff?" I looked around. "I don't see any hanging around."

"Yes," I was told quickly, "you want to be careful about that, Spinner—for there's an award for the neatest room. We're ahead, too, with three gold stars, one for each morning. I'll show you the record downstairs on the wall. We want to keep it up, if we can. Just poke everything into your suitcase in the morning and shove it under the bunk—that's what I do. But how do you like

the joint, anyway?" he got up and proudly walked around.

"Swell," I told him.

"I bet you didn't expect to find bunks like these, huh?" he pulled one out on its castors. "I know I didn't. I thought Mr. Quickley meant old built-in wooden bunks. I never dreamed the state would supply nice iron bunks like these. They were just put in this spring, too—mattresses and all, Smokey told us."

"And who's Smokey?" I asked.

"The caretaker—an old lumberjack from up north. You'll probably meet him at dinner, if he's around. He sleeps downstairs—the only one down there at night. And not a peep in the morning, either, about the racket up here. He's swell. Last night he and Mr. Quickley sat up till one o'clock playing cards—for he's crazy over cards. Wait till you see the place they play in—sitting cross-legged on a pile of mattresses that the state keeps here. We call it the card room. You know, that's one thing we miss around here—chairs. There isn't one in the place—or a card table, either. I suppose the state thinks that bunks is enough for campers. But, gosh, I've been running on like an old woman, haven't I?" he laughed. "It's so good to have you here, though, I've tried to tell you everything at once. We're sure in for a lot of fun, Spinner. But there goes Tubby's

bugle. That means the feed-bag—so chuck your stuff out of sight and come on."

Tubby, red-faced, was still murderously tooting in front when we got down. And then, the massacre over, you should have seen the important swagger with which he took his own seat at the long table, the others glaring at him, particularly Dill Pickle, Mr. Quickley looking on with a dry smile.

"Hugo," he told me, "you can sit over there between Nestor and Richard—as they're in your room. Along with awards for conduct, personal neatness, room orderliness, attitude and Scouting achievement, we have one for table conduct, too, so watch your manners. And, Horace," came sharply, "who are you making faces at?"

It came so unexpectedly that Tubby almost swallowed his tonsils.

"Was I making faces?" he innocently asked.

"It certainly looked like it to me."

"Huh!" Dill Pickle grunted to me under his breath. "I don't know how anybody could tell when *he* makes a face—with that pan of his."

"What was that, Richard?" Mr. Quickley pricked up his ears.

"—times eight is forty, six times eight is forty-eight," Dill Pickle monotonously picked up aloud, to make it appear that he had been reciting the multiplication table to himself.

"That'll do—that'll do," Mr. Quickley blandly stopped him, as a titter went around. "It'll be pots and pans for you the rest of the day, Richard. But where are the others?" he looked around at the three empty seats.

"Poppy and Rodger haven't come in yet—and Smokey, I think, went to town in his pick-up," Dory supplied.

"How did Tubby happen to get his trombone back?" I quietly asked Dill Pickle, during the meal.

"Mr. Quickley's work," he growled. "And *I* had to climb up and take that suit down, too! But just wait till to-night—I'll fix that big tub somehow. And pots and pans! Gr-r-r!"

Dinner over, I was shown the pig in its pen out back and then had my first glorious climb up the rock pile, Poppy coming to meet me when I came down.

"Anything happen this morning?" I eagerly asked, as we walked together through the dense woods at the foot of the rocks.

"No," he shook his head.

"What would you do," I asked further, with a curious look at him, "if someone did try to kidnap Rodger?"

"If necessary, I'd shoot," he said bluntly.

"Shoot?" I echoed, staring.

"Yes—Dory and I both have guns. We got

permits in Madison. That's just between us, though—remember that."

"Where's Dory now?" I asked.

"Upstairs in our room. Rodger's taking a nap."

"Boy, you sure are guarding him, aren't you?"

"To the best of our ability. But what room are you in, Hugo?"

"Fifteen."

"We're in fourteen, just across the hall."

"Just you three?"

"Yes. I sleep in front of the window myself—and when we turn in, Dory pulls his bed in front of the closed door. Rodger has another bed between us. In that way we feel pretty safe."

"You don't talk much like you did that night at Dory's house," I shivered.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you just laughed at me when I said that maybe we'd be able to clear up the mystery here."

"Oh, but we have an entirely different set-up now, Hugo. The fire and the Professor's death have changed everything. Dory and I both feel that almost anything can happen now. It's pretty hard on the nerves, too—I want to tell you. Dory says he doesn't mind it himself, but I do. So does Rodger. This morning, when a squirrel dropped down behind him, he almost jumped out of his skin."

"I'll be glad to see him again," I put in.

"He'll be glad to see you, too. But be careful with your whispering, Hugo. There's too many chances around here of being overheard. And don't let it appear to the others, either, that there's any secret bond between us four. But you go on to camp now and I'll leisurely follow you."

The Scouts were playing soft ball when I got back, with Tubby, as usual, bellowing on first base like a mad bull. Still, I guess he wasn't making any more noise than the others—just being fatter he sounded noisier. A fat kid like that is always noticed the first and kidded the most. But he can take it. He's a swell kid—when he doesn't get musical.

That trombone of his was his mother's idea. Always fussing over him and pampering him, she gave it to him on his twelfth birthday, thinking, I guess, with her great pride in him, that in a week or two he'd be playing solos in our school band. Gosh! Never as long as I live will I forget that first band practice of his and that first ear-splitting unearthly squawk. Our music teacher said one, two, three, begin—and then out it came, literally sending the rest of us cowering into our holes, the dumfounded teacher himself acting as though he couldn't make himself believe that what he had just heard had actually come out of a trombone. The second practice, if anything, was even worse, and the third still worse—after which Tubby dis-

cretely resigned, his trombone thereafter getting an airing only at camping time.

The game finally ended, we scattered off, some down to the lake and others back up the rock pile, getting the usual call at six to come to supper. There I met the caretaker, a big-boned swarthy-faced man who later on, as expected, corraled Mr. Quickley in the card room upstairs.

Rodger and I played dominoes downstairs till nine, the other fellows then coming in from an exciting outside game, which gave me a swell chance, as they all gathered around, to start my "dragon" talk. But instead of acting scared, the listeners all hooted at me. I told them over and over again, with the longest face I could make, that there must have been dragons out there once or the story never would have gotten started. And if there had been dragons once, why not now? But all I got for my trouble was jeers—Tubby brazenly going off to the lake shore with his pig for an evening walk there, telling us that he'd yell if he saw any dragons lying around on the beach.

And pretty soon there *was* a yell—the wildest screechiest scaredest yell I ever heard in all my life. It literally chilled my blood. Then came a squeal from the pig—followed by a gurgle, as if something from the lake, grabbing it, had pulled it under.

Getting flashlights we went down—every last one of us scared out of his wits now, coming finally

to Tubby, senseless on the beach. He had claw marks all over one cheek, and a bloody nose. When we got him in by the electric lights, and up again, he said, with bulging eyes, that something he had heard in the lake—something big and black—had come out after him, knocking him down and crawling right over him.

But there were no dragon tracks there when we shiveringly went back. There was blood in the sand, but whether from Tubby's nose or the pig we couldn't tell.

Of the poor pig itself, there was not the slightest trace.

CHAPTER IX

POPPY'S THEORY

TUBBY, taped and bruised, heroically tooted the camp up the following morning as usual, determined that not even a dragon attack should deprive him of so great an honor as that.

Ned up above, at the first ear-splitting toot, almost went up through the ceiling.

"Suffering cats!" he squawked, looking down pop-eyed. "I thought it was another dragon after *me*."

"Too bad," growled Bobbie, in the other upper, "that that dragon last night didn't finish him—we'd have been spared this."

"What time is it?" I asked, raising for a look out through the trees.

"Six-thirty, I suppose," yawned Bobbie. "That's when he's supposed to bugle."

"But how does he ever wake up himself on time?" I puzzled. "He's never up that early at home. And after last night, you'd think he'd want to sleep till noon."

"Oh, he thinks it's smart to get us up this way," growled Bobbie. "It makes him important. And rather than miss it, he'd lay awake all night long, I guess."

"No, he doesn't do that," Ned put in. "He's got an alarm clock. I saw it."

"Well, why in Sam Hill didn't you hide it?" grunted Bobbie.

"I wish I had now," said Ned, sliding down. "Do you know, Hugo, he even got us up like this the first morning—and you know what the first night in camp is usually like! I don't think anybody had more than two hours' sleep. But, boy, we sure did pound our ears the next night."

The last agonizing squawk got Dill Pickle up, mumbling.

"I'd like to stuff that full of rotten eggs," he growled, groping for his shoes, "and have it back-fire on him. I suppose if I did, though," he mimicked Mr. Quickley, "it would be 'pots and pans for you, Richard.' "

"You and your six times eight is forty-eight!" hooted Ned, firing a pillow at him. "That's the craziest thing I ever heard. I thought I'd bust. No wonder you get pots and pans every day."

"That old Quickley!" Dill Pickle growled, kicking around. "He wouldn't even know enough to laugh if he saw himself slip up on a banana peeling."

"Well, keep your mouth shut to-day for a change," advised Ned, "and let someone else do pots and pans. And listen, fellows!—don't forget that we want another gold star to-day."

"What's the prize?" I asked.

"We don't know yet."

"If it's a box of rat poison," said Dill Pickle, with Tubby still in mind, "I know who'll get it."

"Is it all right if I put my pajamas under the pillow?" I asked Ned, after making my bed.

"Oh, sure! But everything else—chuck it in your suitcase, like I told you."

"Who does the inspecting?" I further asked.

"Mr. Quickley himself. He comes around after sweeps."

"What do you mean by sweeps? We never had anything like that before."

"Well, we never camped in a house before, either. I think it's kind of silly myself, but every morning he makes us sweep the whole upstairs, hall and all. Bobby and I were on sweeps yesterday."

"Yes," Bobbie began tearing madly around for his things, "and that reminds me, too—I'm on kitchen duty for breakfast. Clear the track, fellows."

Doors banged all around us as the aroused Scouts hurried down to the lake with their soap and towel for the required morning clean-up, after which we fooled around within sight of the breakfast table till we got Tubby's second musical treat.

Following that first swell hamburger meal, we had had baked beans, as the main dish, for supper, and now, with the warm morning sunshine pouring in on us, we had our pick of several cold cereals,

with cream from a near-by farm, and all the rich hot cocoa that we could drink.

The meal finished, with everybody bubbling now, Mr. Quickley kept us there as usual to complete the day's program.

"The table setters and waiters for the day," he announced, from his paper, "will be Bobbie and Eddie for breakfast—and, fellows, when you clean up here see that you get all the crumbs swept up—Nestor and Hugo for dinner and Donnie and Milo for supper. You know, of course, that you're supposed to be on hand an hour before meals to spread the bread and set the table. The dish washers for the day will be Clyde Heberlein, Alvin and Wesley—with pots and pans as the usual penalty. I suppose you're listening, Richard?" came dryly.

"Oh, yes, sir," Dill Pickle wagged. "I'm all ears, sir, as the cornstalk told the potato plant."

"Yes," Mr. Quickley spoke above the laugh that followed, "and you'll be up to your ears in pots and pans, if you don't bridle that tongue of yours. While I have you in mind, I think I'll put you and Clarence down for sweeps. The rest can peel potatoes. Try and be through by eight-thirty—all of you—as we're going on a hike over the west bluff. After dinner, after the usual rest period, we'll have personal inspection, then more soft ball, and after that, at four, signal practice in the rocks. Then will come supper, and after

that any inside or outside games you wish, but listen, fellows!—I don't want any more dragon tricks like that one last night. That's too dangerous. We're here to have fun, of course, and I'm going to help with the fun all I can—but that kind of fun is *out*."

I held up my hand.

"Yes, Hugo—what is it?" he inquired.

"I know what you're thinking, Mr. Quickley," I earnestly told him. "But we hadn't anything to do with that last night. We'll all stand up and swear to it on our Scout honor, if you want us to."

"Surely, Hugo," he regarded me curiously, "you aren't trying to make me believe that Horace actually was attacked by a real dragon!"

"Well, all we know, Mr. Quickley," I went over it, "is that something came out of the lake and took the pig back with it."

"Hey!" Dill Pickle popped up, like a jack-in-the-box. "I've got an idea, Mr. Quickley."

"Yes?"

"Maybe," giggled Dill Pickle, with a look at Tubby, "the dragon couldn't see very good in the dark and got the wrong pig."

Well, say!—you never heard such an uproar in all your life!

"I'm sorry, Richard," said Mr. Quickley, when quiet had been restored, "but it'll be pots and pans for you. And, Horace, what do *you* think it was that attacked you?"

"Well, I *did* think it was a dragon, Mr. Quickley," came uncertainly. "Spinner had just been telling us there were dragons there. I thought it was just a gag of his—but something *did* come out of the lake. Something big and black."

"Maybe it was one of those dirty socks of yours," Dill Pickle couldn't resist putting in.

Mr. Quickley gravely looked over his list, the laugh that had started stopping suddenly as all eyes watched him.

"Let me see—who did I put down for dish washers? Oh, yes!—Clyde, Alvin and Wesley. Well, boys, you three will be relieved this morning—Richard is going to do the breakfast dishes all alone. And now, Horace, what was that you were saying?"

"Well, I was walking along with my pig, and all of a sudden something big and black came out of the lake at me. And you know what it did to me."

"Too bad it didn't do more," Dill Pickle growled under his breath.

"Keep still," I nudged him. "Gosh!—you've got more tongue than a farm wagon."

"Well," smiled Mr. Quickley, plainly with not the slightest belief in the dragon theory himself, "this'll give you boys something to wonder about, and I dare say you'll have a lot of fun to-night watching the spot for a possible reappearance of the mysterious attacker—whatever it was. I

think we'll find out, though, that it was a wild goose frightened up, or some kind of a forest animal prowling in the shallow water for crabs."

"But, Mr. Quickley," Tubby argued, "a goose couldn't have taken my pig off. He was pulled down out in the lake. It must have been a dragon or something like that."

"Maybe the boy's right, Mr. Quickley," Smokey spoke up here, but with what I felt was a twinkle in the back of his eye. "I've never seen any dragons here myself, but I've talked with Indians who still believe they're here."

"Well, that belief is perfectly satisfactory with me," Mr. Quickley dryly dismissed the matter. "But to-night, boys, if you do hang around there—please keep together. I don't want any more clawed faces. I understand, too, Horace, that you were totally unconscious when the boys found you last night."

"Yes, sir," Tubby wagged importantly, "I was unconscious, all right."

"How could anybody tell?" piped up Dill Pickle.

"Richard, that'll mean the dinner dishes extra for you," came the added penalty.

Which was too much even for Dill Pickle.

"Oh!" he groaned, stiffening in his seat—then down he slid under the table.

"And the supper dishes, too," Mr. Quickley promptly tacked on. "Well, that'll be all, boys."

As I've told you before—be careful if you go up in the rocks—and all be on hand at eight-thirty."

Rodger hurried around to me as soon as we got up.

"Say, Spinner," he eagerly asked, "are you going on that hike this morning?"

"I'd like to," I told him. "But the doctor told me not to. Why?"

"I thought maybe I could get you to go with me."

"And why not?" I jumped at the idea. "That'll be fun. But where are you going?"

"Oh, anywhere out in the near-by woods. I never go very far. I don't have to go far around here for birds. Boy, I've seen some dandies! I'm not a very good archer, though."

"You ought to have a rifle," I told him.

"Oh, it's more fun to use a bow and arrow. It gives the birds a better chance. Besides, I don't think that Mr. Quickley would approve of a gun. But what do you think of it around here, Spinner? Don't you think it's swell?"

"It couldn't be better, for Boy Scouts," I declared. "I can't figure out, though, how this old hotel ever got any business, built away off here by itself this way. How could anybody ever find it?"

"Oh, there was a railroad here then, that brought excursionists in," he explained. "You can still see the old roadbed back there in the woods. It came up a cut back there. I'll show it to you

this morning, if we go that way. There's an old stone crusher back there, too, and a siding where the railroad used to load up crushed rock for ballast, which was mainly why they built the spur in here. But everything was abandoned around here when the state took over the place for campers."

"I haven't seen any campers yet."

"There'll be plenty here later on, and also up on the north shore where our electricity comes from. But when'll you be ready to start?"

"Just as soon as the potatoes are out of the way. Or maybe I'll go in and give Dill Pickle a lift, as he's in my room. If only he knew enough to keep his mouth shut—the crazy yap!"

"I can wipe," eagerly offered Rodger.

"Well, let's go help him then."

"O-k."

Dill Pickle already was singing in the dish pan when we got there, as happy as you please.

"She'll be washing dirty dishes when she comes," he whooped it up, the dishes clattering in time.

"I can't sing, either," Tubby tantalizingly poked his head in. "Ho, ho, ho! Gather 'round, folks, and see the great camp entertainer in his wonderful dish-washing act. You will call me a pig, huh?—you wizened little monkey-face! I guess you're getting your pay now."

"What happened to your face?" the cook smilingly asked him.

"Hadn't you heard?" piped in Dill Pickle. "He tried to kiss a lady dragon last night and she smacked him in the puss."

"I'll smack you in the puss," bellowed Tubby, "if you don't shut up."

"Oh, look!" Dill Pickle pointed to the ceiling over Tubby's head. "How did that get up there?"

"What?" Tubby stupidly stared up.

Dill Pickle quickly wadded the dish-rag and let it fly.

"*That!*" he yipped, as Tubby got it squarely in the face.

The bellow that followed brought Mr. Quickley running.

"What's going on here?" he demanded, severely looking around.

"Oh, I just dropped my dish-rag," Dill Pickle pleasantly picked it up.

"And what are you bellowing about, Horace?"

"Oh, nothin'," Tubby slouched off, wiping his face.

"Well, you better go outside and help with the potatoes, if you haven't anything else to do. Run along now."

The wiping job finished about eight, I ran down to the lake to wash my hands, Poppy calling me farther off, where he was thoughtfully looking over the spot where the attack had occurred.

"I don't quite agree with Mr. Quickley," he

told me, when I came up. "In the first place, if there had been a wild goose here, as he said at the breakfast table, it would have flown out over the lake, not toward shore. It wouldn't have been stupid enough to fly toward something it heard coming, and feared. Or if it was some kind of a forest animal, as Mr. Quickley also suggested, there would have been tracks. But there are no animal tracks—I've been all up and down the shore. So I think we've got to look farther than that for the true explanation. And I've been wondering, too, ever since it happened, if this hasn't something to do with the Cash boy—the beginning possibly of some queer weird plot against him."

"Gosh! I never thought of that," my heart quickened.

"How was Tubby lying when you found him, Hugo?—on his back?"

"Yes," I nodded.

"With his head away from the lake, or toward it?"

"Away from it."

"Which proves then that he *did* hear something in the lake. Watch me, Hugo, and I'll show you just what happened."

Walking off a few yards, he turned and slowly came back.

"He came down here, probably with the pig at his heels—then he turned toward the lake like

this, as he heard something there—and almost in the same instant, it must have been, he was struck *in the face*. You boys have been talking of dragons, but it was no dragon—if it had been, or anything like it, there would have been tracks, and there are no tracks. The boy himself says something crawled over him to get the pig—but how does he know?—he was knocked out before he even hit the ground. Look at the sand around here! It couldn't have been the blow from the ground that knocked him out. I could knock you down here a dozen times, Hugo, and you'd think it was fun. No—it was the face blow that knocked him senseless—from something big and black, he said. Well, maybe it was big and black and maybe it wasn't—he had his mind full of dragons then—thanks to you!—so it's doubtful if he knows what he really did see. Remember, too, how dark it was. Mr. Quickley says it was a wild goose—suddenly scared up. I think I've exploded that theory. His other idea was that it was a forest creature, but the absence of animal tracks disproves that, and the dragon theory. My guess is, in final, that it was something hurled by a man—or the leaping man himself, possibly a negro or someone all in black. And I say again, it could be some kind of a weird attempt against the dwarf."

"But, Poppy!" I cried, almost as much scared by his earnest decisive talk as I had been by the actual occurrence. "How about the pig? What

became of it? We heard it when it was being pulled down in the lake."

"You heard it in the lake, all right—I won't argue that an instant. But I doubt if it was pulled down, Hugo. My prediction is that before the day is over its carcass will be washed ashore. But there's Rodger up there beckoning to you with his bow. He's eager to start. So go on with him, and I'll fall in behind."

CHAPTER X

THE SNAKE WOMAN

Was Poppy right? Had Tubby been struck down by something hurled at him by someone on or in the lake, or by the leaping hurler himself? Or had some living thing struck him down, as Mr. Quickley believed?

Throughout the day I swung one way and then the other in my own beliefs, almost hoping at times, for the fun that would be in it, that it *would* turn out to be a dragon after all.

Tubby himself declared that it was, tracks or no tracks. And by nightfall, as his imagination got going good, he even was describing its eyes and mouth. The eyes were as big as saucers, he said—sort of reddish, like blood, around the edge, and green, like a cat's, in the center. And that mouth! Oh, what a mouth!—and what a miracle that he, Tubby—the hero now telling it!—had ever escaped alive. From two feet wide, and with teeth as big as axe heads, the mouth grew in retelling to finally four feet wide, with teeth as big and deadly as elephant tusks.

Mr. Quickley and Smokey through it all laughed dryly, going off unconcerned after supper for the usual card game upstairs. Poppy was too

deeply engrossed in his own growing theory to more than smile occasionally at the exciting dragon talk around him, but Dory, always lighter spirited, laughingly followed us around for what he could hear.

Well, with a monster like that at large, threatening not only our own lives but the lives of everybody for miles around, something certainly had to be done about it—and as true Boy Scouts, pledged to help people at all times, it plainly was up to us to do the deed. So at dusk, with clubs and rocks, we gathered in ambush. Of course, every Scout there, even Tubby himself (the big liar!), knew there were no dragons there. We were just having fun. It's things like that, that a fellow can't do at home, that makes a camping trip memorable. Hidden in little groups along the shore, we bragged how we'd rush out, when the monster finally appeared, stoning or clubbing it to death, later embalming it like a whale that came to Madison one time in a special railroad car, and exhibiting it, with great profit, from coast to coast.

For what loyal Boy Scout, we argued, wouldn't put up a dime, or even a quarter, to see a dragon that another daring bunch of Boy Scouts had killed, in the dark, on a lonely Wisconsin beach? A million Scouts at a quarter apiece would be a quarter of a million dollars. Oh, boy! We even talked finally of swimming out and driving the gold mine in.

Dory and Rodger picked their way down in the dark at nine to see if the capture was over, dropping down beside us for the fun of it, and then, to everybody's amazement, we *did* hear something, though at first we thought it was just a fish.

There was a flop up toward the hotel, then another, and still another. We knew now that it wasn't a fish. It was easy to imagine, too, as the flopping continued, that it was indeed a dragon up there flipping its scaly tail around in the shallow water.

"Well! I wonder what that is," puzzled Dory, even startled himself by it.

"Did Poppy tell you what he thinks?" I quickly asked, in a whisper.

"Yes—and maybe it is someone wading around up there in the dark. Rodger!" he softly called. "Where are you?"

"Over here," came the soft reply from a foot or two away.

"Gosh, it's so dark I couldn't see you—but come over closer. I want to keep a hand on you."

Splash, splash, splash! If this was some kind of a scheme against the dwarf, the man certainly must be crazy, I told myself, to keep splashing so openly. Or even if it was a scheme to lure us there, for some unknown purpose, what could he hope to accomplish against so many? Determined, like Dory, to know the truth and capture the man or whatever it was if possible, I crawled

with the others nearer and nearer, till finally the splashing wasn't more than fifteen feet away.

"That's it!" Tubby gurgled in my ear as we stopped, his heart going like a triphammer, every eye now trying to penetrate the intense darkness. "That's what I heard last night."

And now comes the crazy part. For when we finally rushed out with our flashlights and clubs, prepared for any action, what do you think it was we found there? A dragon? Oh, gee!—you know better than that. A negro? No, it wasn't even that.

It was just Cookie, in his birthday suit, taking a bedtime bath.

And, boy, did he tell us a few crisp (and scorching) things, when our flashlights immodestly picked him out.

"So that's what you heard last night, was it?" I jeered at Tubby, as he slouched beside me crestfallen to the hotel, the indignant bather still scorching the air behind us.

"Huh!" was Tubby's only red-faced reply.

"I'm beginning to think myself," piped Dill Pickle, "that you knocked yourself out last night."

"I didn't, either," Tubby blusteringly denied. "Something from the lake hit me in the face. I've got the claw marks there to prove it."

"Oh!" came quickly from Dill Pickle. "So it was something with claws, huh?"

"It certainly was," maintained Tubby.

"Then I know what it was," Dill Pickle ran off into one of his crazy giggles. "It was Santa Claus."

Inside, I quickly hunted up Poppy.

"You overlooked those claw marks," I told him, referring to his earlier deductions on the beach.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, you think a man in the lake threw something at Tubby—but whatever it was that smacked him, or leaped at him, it had claws."

"Or long fingernails," he annexed unswerved.

"Yes, that's possible, too," I conceded. "But why would the man, if it was a man as you say, take the pig off and drown it?"

"Oh, yes!—I meant to tell you before, Hugo, but forgot it. Just as I predicted, the carcass was washed up this afternoon. I found it, when you boys were playing ball, and buried it. I think now the pig swam terrified into the lake and drowned."

"Terrified?" I repeated. "But it wouldn't have been that scared of a man."

"Wait till we catch the man, Hugo," Poppy let it rest there, going off oddly laughing.

For Pete's sake!—and what did he mean by that?—that we had some man hanging around, mean-enough looking or homely enough to scare a pig to death? Suffering cats! If a pig couldn't stand him any better than that, what chance had

we? Still, I reasoned, that final laugh of Poppy's was reassuring. Probably the man wasn't half as hideous or dangerous as I had let myself imagine. Maybe, even, the pig had a weak heart—though if that was the case it should have folded up long before from looking at Tubby. Or maybe, was my final and more sensible conclusion, I was a million miles from the truth.

We had been too scared the night before for much fun, but, oh, boy, we sure did cut loose that night, even tying Mr. Quickley and Smokey in their card room. When they finally got out there wasn't a Scout in sight, nor was there the slightest sound around, but I want to tell you there were plenty of ears pressed against closed doors and under transoms, and plenty of choked-down giggles, too. Until then we had been in and out of our own and everybody else's bunks a hundred times, with pillows and bare legs flying everywhere, and all kinds of such fun. It isn't so much to tell about, but any Scout who has been through it knows exactly how much fun we got out of it. Mr. Quickley came out pretty huffy, though, when he caught us playing pajama tag on the porch roof, sharply settling us for the night.

Then came another day, with its crazy early bugle call, with more fun and more swell meals, then another glorious night, and so on up to Friday, when something happened that gave us (I

mean the four of us) our first real clew, though it wasn't till later that we actually recognized it as a clew.

Dill Pickle and I were on sweeps that morning, Mr. Quickley having announced at the breakfast table that as soon as our combined work was done he'd take us over the south bluff to a rattlesnake farm that a woman strangely operated there. Until now I had passed up all the long hikes as ordered, but this one, I learned, was comparatively short, and wanting to see a woman who could extract rattlesnake venom, I determined to go. It was the only business of its kind in the country, we were told—the owner, a native of the section and probably the state's foremost authority on rattlers, catching all the snakes herself, some of which were sold to shows and zoos, but getting the most of her money from hospitals, for the venom, and from the sale of dried skins and rattlers to curious summer tourists, a road reaching her place from the south.

Quickly finishing the first room on my side of the hall, I hurried on to the next, and then the third, Dill Pickle stopping me there to show me a woman's photograph that he had just picked up under Cookie's bed.

"It's probably his sister," I said, with an indifferent glance at it. "Go on and get out of here with it. I'm not interested in it. You better get back to work, too, if you expect to finish on time.

For remember—you've got all the other side of that hall to do."

"His sister nothin'," giggled Dill Pickle, turning the picture over. "Look what's written on the back: 'With undying love, to George from Alice.' Don't you catch on, Spinner?—it's his boyhood sweetheart! He had it under his pillow last night, but it fell out on the floor. Just imagine an old bald-headed bachelor like him still slipping a girl's photograph under his pillow at night!"

"It may be his wife," I guessed. "Go on and put it back, and quit being so nosey."

"But he never had a wife, Spinner. I heard Mr. Quickley tell Smokey so."

"Well, go put it back anyway," I impatiently ordered, "and get to work. It's his privilege if he wants to put a picture under his pillow. You shouldn't be so snoopy. But I can hear someone coming up the stairs," I hastily added. "For Pete's sake beat it—before he catches you with it."

"Hey, Spinner!" Rodger called from the stairs. "Where are you?"

"Down here in number seven," I called back.

"Can I do anything to help you?" he eagerly offered, coming in.

"No, I'm getting along all right myself. But old snoopy-pants here is going to need help, if he doesn't get back to his own side in a jiffy."

"Take a look, Rodger," Dill Pickle showed the worn photograph.

"Who is it?—your mother when she was young?"

"No—it's my sweetheart," came the joke.

"Oh, it isn't either, Rodger," I pounced in. "It's a picture of some young woman, taken years ago, that he picked up in Cookie's room—only he hadn't the decency to leave it there. Now, get out with it," I went at the snooper with my broom. "If you don't, you'll get a swat you'll remember."

"You're the boss," he went off, still giggling.

"I'm going on that hike this morning," Rodger told me, when we were alone.

"Swell!"

"Not that I like snakes—I hate them, in fact," he shivered. "Ugh! The bare thought of them gives me the creeps. But Mr. Quickley told me further that the old snake woman has a stuffed-bird collection, having made a hobby of it, like me. I'm anxious to see it, as he says she's got stuffed water fowls, too—ducks, geese and even swans."

As expected, I had to finally pitch in on Dill Pickle's side to help him out, but by nine all was done, upstairs and down, and we were off, Poppy and Dory included, all laughing and talking at once as Scouts do at the start of a promising hike like that.

We struck more than usual vegetation in our climb that morning, with moss in places several inches thick, and everywhere in the rocks mats of

stubbed hardy ferns. But most amazing of all to me, as we climbed up and up, were the pine trees there. What nourishment their roots could possibly find in a rocky pile like that was beyond me, but hardier trees I never had seen anywhere, some with trunks several feet thick at the base.

"Do you suppose that any of the woman's snakes ever get away?" Rodger anxiously asked, when we finally came to the cultivated clearing above that helped the farm's owner eke out a miserable living, her shabby little log cabin showing just beyond.

"If they did get away they probably wouldn't stay around here long," I assured, to quiet him.

"But you don't care if I take your hand, do you, Spinner?" he showed increasing uneasiness as we drew closer to the place.

"Not at all," I laughed. "Help yourself."

Noticing, Dill Pickle just behind slyly found a pointed stick, and opposite a spreading rhubarb plant (the swellest kind of a hiding place for a rattlesnake!) poked Rodger in the legs.

"Br-r-r!" went Dill Pickle, like a rattler.

"Oh, I hate you! I hate you!" danced Rodger, his gasping fright changing to screaming dancing fury when he saw what it was, Dill Pickle falling back. "Some day I'm going to kill you for that. Yes, I am," the screaming dancing threat was repeated. "I'm going to kill you for that. I am, I am, I am!"

And off he ran as fast as he could go, Poppy and Dory, dumfounded, after him.

"What happened?" anxiously asked Mr. Quickley, coming back.

Dill Pickle confessed shamefaced.

"It was a mean trick, Richard," he was censured. "That's the great trouble with you, if I may say so—you have no restraint over your tongue or your tricks—not that you mean the slightest harm, but jibes and tricks are always barbs, and liable to hurt. But go on after the boy and see if you can't square yourself with him. We'll wait here."

"Do you like him, Spinner?" Ned curiously asked me, as we waited.

"Rodger? Of course, I do," I staunchly returned.

"Well," came bluntly, "I don't. I played the same trick on Clarence, but he didn't fly into a passion. He just laughed it off. You would, too, or any of the other fellows. That little guy must think he's terribly important."

"He isn't well," I defended. "He's in pain all the time."

"Was it you that got him into the troop?"

"Yes, and I'm glad I did. It's the first fun the poor kid ever had."

"Well, you can have him all. I don't care for kids who want to kill people when they get peeved."

"But he didn't mean it," I further defended. "You say things yourself when you get mad that you don't mean."

"Maybe so. But I'd hate to think that I ever *looked* like that. He looked like a killer."

Which was true. But knowing what the poor kid had gone through, to shatter his nerves, I could readily overlook it all myself, still determined to stick with him helpfully to the end.

Dill Pickle came back alone.

"He wouldn't come back, Mr. Quickley," he quietly reported. "I told him how sorry I was, and he forgave me, but he said he wanted to go on home. Poppy and Dory went with him."

The snake woman, tall and mannish, and plainly disturbed in the middle of a cry, came out in a plain cheap dress as we came up.

"No," she shook her graying head, dabbing at the tears that persisted on her wrinkled weathered cheeks, "I can't show you my snakes to-day. Some other time possibly—but not to-day."

"Is there anything we can do for you?" Mr. Quickley anxiously asked, thinking she might be in pain or in need of a doctor.

"No," she again shook her head, dabbing. "There's nothing that you can do for me, sir. Thank you just the same, though. And now, please go."

"When would you suggest that we come back?" Mr. Quickley waited to ask. "We're only going

to be around here another week. We're camping at the old Courtland house. The boys would like very much to see your snakes and birds."

"Birds?" she repeated, with a sudden frightened air that passed quickly. "Oh! You mean my stuffed birds. I thought you meant— But are you interested in birds?"

"Boy Scouts and their leaders always are. We have one new Scout, too, who has made a hobby of stuffed birds, like you."

"Yes?" she eagerly looked us over, so kindly now in her manner, and so loveable, that one could hardly associate her with snakes. She sure was a nice old lady, all right.

"The boy isn't with us right now," Mr. Quickley told her. "But we can bring him back tomorrow, if it'll be convenient for you then."

"Oh, no, no!" her grief suddenly returned.

"Well, how about next Monday?"

"No, no," she further shook her head. "And please go now."

"But when can we come?" Mr. Quickley pressed.

"I—I don't know. Don't you see, sir?—my poor heart is breaking. It's my boy!—my son!—they keep hounding him. Oh, if only they'd forget and leave him alone—but they won't. It's always the law, the law, the law! No one thinks of his poor mother and her sorrow. They'll be after him—and then I'll be all alone again, with

only snakes for company. Things that others fear! Things that strike, and kill! That is my miserable lot in life—and loneliness and bitter poverty. But I shouldn't have told you that," she added in a burst of passion, her eyes dilated. "Forget that I said it. Please, please don't repeat it. And now go—I beg of you. Good-by."

CHAPTER XI

SYLVESTER JOSHUA COURTLAND

"WELL, boys, how many dried snake skins did you bring home with you this morning?" Smokey laughingly inquired, when we trudged in at eleven-thirty, hot, tired and thirsty, hoping that dinner would soon be ready and that there would be lots of it.

"Just one," grinned Dill Pickle, never too tired for nonsense. "But we didn't bring it back dried—we brought it back stuffed, with a Scout hat on it. That's it waddling along back there with a taped face."

"But I don't see Mr. Quickley," Smokey looked down the straggling line.

"He and a couple others stopped in the woods for birch bark."

"Well, tell him when he gets here that I put a package in his room. It came by special delivery this morning."

"Boy, I hope it's a cake," Dill Pickle hungrily rubbed his stomach.

After dinner, Mr. Quickley told us that the package contained a special "Attitude" trophy, contributed by one of the business men back home, which was to be awarded to the Scout doing the

most, as a whole, to make the camping trip a Scouting success.

"When do I get it?" asked Clarence, with one of his broad friendly grins. "Do I get it right now, Mr. Quickley?—or do I have to wait till next Friday?"

"And what is it?" another eagerly inquired. "Can we see it?"

"No," Mr. Quickley smilingly put us off. "I'm going to keep it a secret till I award it. I can promise you, though, that the Scout who earns it is going to be very proud of it."

"Say, Mr. Quickley!—I know what you ought to do," Dill Pickle began bobbing in his seat, never able to keep still more than two minutes at a time, or keep his big mouth shut. "You ought to give it to the Scout who does pots and pans the most."

"No, Richard," Mr. Quickley blandly declined the suggestion, laughing along with the rest of us. "I'm afraid that would give you too much of an advantage. I have something much broader than that in mind. By 'most' I didn't necessarily mean the Scout who performed the most of our unpleasant tasks, but the one who did the most useful things, as you might say, to make the camp go along smoothly, happily and successfully. But that's about all I can tell you now. I'm going to let you Scouts mainly figure out for yourselves just what it is that makes a camp like ours go along smoothly and happily. Is it the quarrelsome or

unwilling Scout?—or the good-natured obliging Scout? Is it the Scout who tries to sneak out of little allotted tasks?—or the Scout who always does a little bit more than asked for? Is it the sour face?—or the grinner? Is it the slovenly Scout?—or the Scout who could step out anywhere at any time and be a credit to our organization? Do you see the mark you have to shoot at, boys? In the little red books that Poppy, Dory and I are carrying, the circles and crosses after your names will win for you or defeat you. That's all, boys. But be around at two, as usual, for personal inspection."

I found Dill Pickle inside gloomily studying his record on the wall.

"Well, anyway," he shrugged, "I got a gold star every time for clean hands. The old dish pan did that much for me."

"I wonder who'll win the new trophy?" I mused.

"I hope it's somebody in our room," came loyally.

"So do I."

"Well, you've got a good chance, Spinner," he quickly told me.

"So have you," I felt I should return.

"Oh, shucks! I couldn't win anything like that. But I tell you what I'll do," he eagerly offered.

"I'll do all the pots and pans for you, and for Ned

and Bobbie, too, so you then can keep your clothes cleaner for inspection. One of you three ought to win."

Mr. Quickley, passing by on his way upstairs, got out a little book and marked in it, with an odd look back at us.

"Didn't I tell you?" groaned Dill Pickle, clutching his head. "I've got a bad mark already, for conniving. Honest, Spinner, I couldn't win a trophy against a flock of wooden Indians. I guess I'm dumb, all right."

"You're the only one who's guessing about it," Tubby spitefully put in, as he waddled by, his hat importantly cocked on the back of his head.

"Yes," Dill Pickle shot at him, "and if that old lady hadn't seen you this morning, we could have seen her snakes, too. But she wasn't going to have you scare them to death."

"Joke over!" hooted Tubby. "Haw, haw, haw!"

"Oh, pull in your ears," Dill Pickle gave him another quick one. "Nobody's bidding on mules to-day."

"The boy with the pretty yellow curls!" hooted Tubby.

"Well, what would you expect me to have?—feathers?"

"And why not? A goose has 'em. Haw, haw, haw!"

Dill Pickle clutched his head.

"Somebody bring me an aspirin!" he gurgled.
"Boy, did I walk into that one!"

Poppy earnestly beckoned me aside.

"Go on up and see if you can do anything with that Cash kid, Hugo. He's up there in his room crying now. He wouldn't eat any dinner, either."

"What's the matter with him?" I anxiously asked, having wondered during the meal where he was.

"Oh, he's just ashamed of himself, I guess, for flying up that way. But aren't you going up?" came quickly, as I darted for the kitchen.

"Sure thing," I promised. "I'm just going to get him some fruit."

But when I took it up to him, I couldn't get in. He didn't want anything to eat, he sullenly said through the locked door, and he didn't want to see me or anybody else.

"What's the matter, Rodger?" inquired Mr. Quickley, when I anxiously brought him to see what he could do. "Why have you locked yourself in?"

"Because I want to," was snapped back.

"Well, I want to come in. Open up."

"I won't," came defiantly.

"You're going to be awfully sorry for this, Rodger. You're not acting like a Boy Scout at all—you're acting like a baby."

"Oh, shut up and go on away!" came uncivilly.

"Would you like to go home?" quietly asked Mr. Quickley.

"Yes, I would. I hate it here, and I hate you and everybody else."

"Very well. Start packing. I'll go tell Poppy and Dory."

"Oh, no, no, Mr. Quickley!" the poor unstrung kid came out then, piteously begging. "Don't send me away. Please."

"But you said you wanted to go."

"I didn't mean it. Oh, I wish I hadn't got mad that way," he wrung his hands. "I wanted the boys to like me, and now they'll think I'm a sissy—and just when I was so happy. There must be something wrong with my head. Something just *makes* me do those things. Please forgive me, Mr. Quickley."

"Gladly, Rodger," came gently. "But you better lie down now. I think, from the eager look on Hugo's face, that he wants to lie with you, too. You two can talk things over here, and when you come downstairs again everything will be all right."

"Then you're going to let me stay?" came tremulously.

"Why, of course. We all want you to stay, feeling that we owe you a sort of duty, the same as you'd feel you owed a younger brother who couldn't stand as much as you yourself. If you were to leave now we'd feel that we'd failed you

in some respect, and feel badly about it. And, Hugo!—wasn't this the day I was to take you back to that Bergtown doctor, over the hills? Maybe Rodger would like to ride in with us."

"Would you, Rodger?" I eagerly asked.

"Why, sure!" his face lit up. "I'd love to go with *you*—any place."

"Well, if you two fall asleep up here, I'll call you," Mr. Quickley went off laughing.

We had too much to talk about to go to sleep, about the squareness of boys and their willingness to overlook things, Dory and Poppy looking in by turn to make sure that everything was all right, and Dory finally riding in with us at four.

"What's the Bergtown doc doing to your head, anyway, Hugo?—trying to put something in it?" Dory asked me, as we stopped in the little town's business section and all got out.

"No, he's making my face over—he thought I looked too much like you," I fired back.

The doctor was engaged when we went in, so the others, rather than wait there idly, went out to buy some camp supplies and souvenirs, a slim flaxen-haired delicate-featured Bergtown Scout then tiptoeing in and across to the closed inner-office door. I thought he was going right in, but instead he got out his Scout knife at the door and alertly tapped out a short message there, getting one from within in return.

There was something about him that made me

think of Dill Pickle—he had that same clean neat look, for whatever one has to say about Dill Pickle's big mouth, certainly no one could ever justly complain of his appearance. This boy, though, hadn't the other's rugged color, but looked as though he had seen a lot of sickness, and through it had been brought up to expect more than usual approving personal attention.

He had slyly glanced at me once or twice as he nervously fidgeted about the room, and finally came over.

"Are you waiting to see Uncle Ben?" he asked, in a pleasant eager interested voice.

"I'm waiting to see the doctor," I told him.

"That's Uncle Ben," he beamed. Then he sobered. "Is there something the matter with your head?" he inquired.

Was there something the matter with my head! Too bad Dory had missed that.

"I've had a lot of Scouts tell me there was," I laughed.

"Scouts have a lot of fun together, don't they?" he comprehendingly laughed with me.

"They sure do," I heartily agreed.

"They're always kidding each other."

"We do—I know that."

Then he sobered again.

"But I mean—did you hurt your head?" he qualified.

"Yes—I accidentally bit myself up there."

"On top of your head!" he stared. "How could you bite yourself away up there?"

"I stood on a box."

But after our laugh, I told him the truth about it, and about our camp at the near-by lake.

"But how did you happen to come to Uncle Ben?" he further quizzed. "Had you heard about him in Madison?"

"No, I just asked your policeman who was a good doctor around here, and he sent me here. Maybe it's lucky he didn't send me to a horse doctor, huh? But tell me," my curiosity got me, "was that a Morse-code message that you just tapped out on the doctor's door?"

"Yes," came merrily. "I tapped out: 'Are you busy, Uncle Ben?' And he tapped back: 'Yes—go away.'"

"Well," I laughed, "he certainly can't be cutting out anybody's appendix in there, to take time to do that."

"He cut out *my* appendix," came proudly, and yet with a definite modesty, too. "First, Daddy wanted to take me to the Mayo clinic, but I said I wanted Uncle Ben to do it. So it was done right here in Bergtown. I've always had Uncle Ben for everything, and Daddy has, too. How many different things have you had?"

"What kind of things?" I grinned.

"Diseases."

"I don't remember any."

"Didn't you even have the chicken pox?" he stared incredulously.

"Not that I remember. I may have had it when I was a tiny baby."

"Well, I've had everything, I guess," he sighed. "The minute something new comes to town, I always get it. Daddy says I owe my life to Uncle Ben. Of course, he isn't my real Uncle Ben—I just call him that because he's done so much for me. But you haven't told me your name yet. Mine's Sylvester Joshua Courtland."

"Courtland?" I repeated. "That's the name of the old hotel we're camping in."

"And can't you guess?" he beamed.

"Guess what?" I asked back.

"Who built it, years ago."

"You?" I grinned.

"Oh, of course not! You're always joking."

"Who did build it?"

"My Grandpa Courtland. *His* name was Joshua, too—that's why I was given the name. But isn't it pretty out at the lake?" he ran on. "I'd like to live there the year around, like Grandpa did in the pioneer days, but that's the only thing that Daddy won't do for me. He doesn't like the lake at all. In the winters we go to Florida. He says it's a relief to him to get away from here. But I'd rather stay myself. I

like the snow and ice—when it doesn't make me sick. But you still haven't told me your name," he reminded, with a winsome little smile.

"Spinner Frey," I gave it.

"But Spinner isn't your real name, is it?" he wanted to know all about it.

"Well, Hugo then—if you want to know my full name."

"Hugo Frey!" he thoughtfully repeated it. "I think that's a nice name. Do you have a father and mother?"

"Sure thing."

"I have just Daddy," he said simply. "Mum-mie died when I was born. Even Uncle Ben couldn't save her. But we have a housekeeper who is almost as good as a real mother," he ran on. "And until I was ten I had a steady nurse. Her name was Mary. She was a lot of fun."

Boy, he wasn't in my class—I could plainly see that. Still, he didn't say it in a boasting way, either. Florida trips and nurses were as common with him evidently as potato soup was at our house.

With all he had, and had seen, he was one of the nicest Scouts, I had to admit, that I ever had met—and certainly one of the friendliest.

"How long are you going to camp here?" he asked, as I further waited.

"We're leaving a week from to-morrow," I told him.

"Our Scouts are going to camp there, too, later on. But Daddy doesn't want me to go."

"Why not?"

"Oh," came with a shrug, "he's afraid I'll get hurt."

"But you've got to learn to stand on your own feet some time," I argued.

"That's exactly what I tell him. But he says 'no.' And do you know what one of the other Scouts told me?" came in a lowered mysterious voice.

"No—what?" I grinned at his manner.

"*He* says that Daddy's afraid of the old snake woman out there—he overheard his parents say so. That's why I've been told I can't go out there. Daddy's afraid the old snake woman will do something to me, in revenge."

Boy, from idle talk, this was getting almost serious!

"Revenge for what?" I curiously asked.

"I don't know," he wonderingly shook his head. "When I asked Daddy, he said I must never never *never* say anything like that again. He was white, too. Do you think that old woman would really harm me, if she caught me out there?"

"Of course not," I bluntly declared. "She's a nice old woman."

"Daddy *did* seem afraid when he was talking about her," came puzzledly. "Do you suppose it's because she keeps snakes?"

"I'd sooner think it was because of some old trouble between them," I spoke more practically.

"But what could she have done to cause Daddy to fear her?" he further puzzled.

"Maybe it was something *he* did," I pointed out.

Which brought another incredulous stare.

"Daddy? Oh, no! He gives money to the poor and to the churches and everybody. He wouldn't do anything to harm an old woman."

But someone or something *had* harmed her, the bitter tears I had seen that morning proved that. From what I had just been told I drew the sensible conviction, too, that the boy's father probably had much more to do with it than he cared to have his son learn. Some kind of family trouble probably, I concluded, and certainly nothing that concerned me. Still, it left me curious.

Our talk wound up by the boy excitedly inviting me up to his home for supper (only *he* called it dinner!—some class to old Spinner, huh?), with the hope that between us we could coax his father into letting him go back to the camp with me for the night. Then the private door opened and the tall bushy-haired patient who had been in there so long came out.

"Why, Daddy!" the boy cried, in a flood of mingled surprise and pleasure. "I never dreamed it was you in there. And you're looking so—so

grave! Daddy! What's the matter? Is it your heart again?"

"Oh," the man nervously laughed it off, "I was just having a little chat with your Uncle Ben. But listen here!—how long has this secret tapping been going on between you two?"

"Ever since I joined the Scouts," the boy laughed. Then he started pulling his father's hand. "And, Daddy!—come over here. This is a Madison Scout. He's camping at the lake, and he's going to have dinner with us to-night, if his Scoutmaster will let him. His name is Hugo Frey."

"Well, well, well," the jolly doctor put in, during the ensuing hand shaking. "How did you two Scouts get acquainted so quickly?"

"That's the way Boy Scouts are, Uncle Ben. But Hugo wants you to put some clean bandages on his head now—and please hurry with him! I'm going out with Daddy, but I'll be right back."

The man's palm, I had noticed during the firm handclasp, was cold and clammy, as though he either wasn't well or had just had some kind of a nervous fright. I noticed, too, that it was hard for him, as he went out with the boy, to force a jolly front.

He was a man of unusually fine appearance and manners, probably in his fifties, with an air of wealth and success. Yet there was something

about his deepset eyes—some uneasy almost hunted or remorseful expression there—that turned me against him the instant I met him, though I never dreamed then that he was in any way involved in the dwarf's tragic riddle, or that some indefinable protective instinct had prompted my feelings.

That knowledge, and his complete undoing, were to come later.

CHAPTER XII

GROWING TANGLES

"WELL, Hugo, how does that feel?" Doctor Meade inquired, as he put on the final tape, Mr. Quickley and the others having come and gone during the work with the promise to drive in for me at nine.

"Swell," I praised.

"You've been so quiet through it all, I thought maybe the dressing wasn't comfortable."

"I've just been sitting here thinking about something the Courtland boy told me," I admitted.

The doctor laughed softly.

"Little Josh?—he's quite a talker, isn't he? But a grand noble little gentleman, too, I want you to know. God never made a finer one. What life around here would be like without him, I can't imagine. Sometimes it frightens me when—when— Well, when he doesn't seem to get along as well as he might," was finished with a grave sigh.

"He told me he'd had a lot of sickness."

"And you were sitting there worrying about it, eh?"

"No, it wasn't that," I shook my head. "It was something about that old snake woman out at the lake."

"How did he happen to mention her, Hugo?" came quietly.

"Oh, we were talking about the lake and how pretty it was out there—and how he'd like to go camping there himself."

"Did he say anything about her son?—or about him getting out of prison?"

"No. But is her son a prisoner?" I eagerly inquired.

"Yes. He was sent up eighteen years ago."

"Then that must have been what she was talking about this morning when we stopped there to see her snakes," I quickly thought back. "She was crying, too."

"Did you notice a man around there, Hugo?"

"No."

"I heard yesterday that her son had been reported missing again from the Oregon prison farm—and always before, when he ran away, he headed for home."

"Then that's what she meant," I quickly caught on. "Say," my excitement grew, "he *was* there, for she said something about the law coming after him, and leaving her alone again. And that's why she kept telling us to go, and wouldn't show us her snakes. She didn't want us to see him. Why, it's all as plain as day now."

"Well, listen, Hugo!—if I were you I wouldn't say anything about this to-night to Little Josh," I was gravely advised.

"I hadn't intended to. But why was the snake woman's son sent to prison?" my curiosity grew.

"What did he do to deserve such a long sentence?"

"That, Hugo, is something I don't care to discuss with you. I'm sorry, of course, that Jerry Ash has had to spend all these years behind bars, but in that he really has only himself to blame. If he had submitted to his original sentence, he could have gotten out, with good behavior, in two years. But instead, in that headstrong battling way of his, he took advantage of the first opportunity to break out, thus adding to his sentence instead of shortening it. Placed finally in a prison farm, he broke out again. He's done that year after year, thus accounting for his long detention."

"Well, should I notify your police department that he's out there now?" I excitedly asked.

"The state officers always know where to look for him."

"But why does he always come home, if he knows that's where they'll look for him first?"

"Because it is home. You know what your own home would mean to you and how you'd yearn for it if forcibly taken away from it. Well, Jerry never was anything but a big overgrown home-loving boy at heart. That's the pitiable part of it. It's killing his old mother, having him come back that way, and then having to give him up again, knowing that it was love for her and his home that prompted the repeated break."

"Do he and his mother ever try to fight the officers off?"

"Oh, no!" came hastily. "They're not that type at all. She just goes out to meet them in tears, with him meekly after her. But remember, Hugo!—none of this to Little Josh to-night."

"But listen, Doc!" I jumped to a new track. "He wants to go back to camp with me to-night, so why don't you tell his father it'll be good for him. And it will, too. He says he'd give anything in the world to just spend one night with us and share in our fun. That old woman won't get any chance to harm him. I'll see to that."

"But what makes you think she might, Hugo?" I was asked steadily.

"That's Little Josh's idea. He got it from one of the Scouts he knows."

"Old Martha Ash, with all of her supposed grievance against the Courtland branch, wouldn't stoop to a dastardly act like that," the doctor declared. "I know Martha too well to believe that for an instant. And if that's all that's keeping Little Josh from sharing in your fun to-night, maybe I will drop in, as you suggest, and put in a word in his behalf. Certainly, he's deserving of anything that any of us can do to add to his happiness. Some day, if he lives, he'll fall heir to one of the wealthiest estates in this section. At one time his grandfather's holdings went miles back into the hills, taking in the whole lake. That

hotel brought him thousands more—all of which will fall to Little Josh some day. But I think that's him tiptoeing in now. Wait!—we'll know in a minute."

And sure enough, the expected door tapping began.

"Uncle . Ben . you . are . an . old . slow . poke," the doctor chucklingly decoded.

"Boy!" I laughed. "You're a whole lot better with the Morse code than I am."

"Little Josh and I learned it together."

Paying him then, I hurried out, the boy happily taking me off to his home, an even more beautiful one than Dory's. Built of colored granite, it must have had at least twenty rooms in it, or so it seemed to me as the lively young owner took me upstairs and down, showing me a complete little theatre in the attic, where he and his chums put on whole plays, and in his own room, with its connected bath, more costly collections of things than I ever before had seen in any one boy's possession.

"What do you collect?" he finally asked me.

"Stamps," I told him.

"Is that all?"

"I have a few arrowheads."

"Do you know which of all my collections I like best?" he then inquired, with that winsome smile of his.

"Your model airplanes?" I guessed.

"No—my elephants."

"*Elephants?*" I repeated, staring. "Suffering cats!—do you own a zoo, too?"

"Here they are," he laughingly told me, pulling out the top drawer of a beautiful gold-inlaid Chinese cabinet. "These are the ones Mummie collected when she was a little girl. I have mine in the lower drawer. Would you like to see them all?"

"Just a minute," I stopped him, as things began to click in my head. "Did you say your mother collected these when she was small?"

"Yes. Aren't they pretty? That one there," he pointed, "came from Norway, according to Daddy's story. It's all hand-carved. And look at this one!—but please don't drop it! Isn't it odd? And this broken one—its hind feet are gone—came out of some ruins in Palestine. The archeologist who sent it to Mummie said it probably was more than three thousand years old. There are eighty-eight here altogether, all different, and all given to Mummie by friends and relatives. I've had a lot given to me, too. One that I bought in Florida—carved from solid ebony—cost forty-five dollars. But you're so quiet—I don't believe you're interested."

"Don't you think I'm not," I forcibly corrected, as my eyes jumped over the collection.

"Would you like to see mine now?"

"No—just a minute more," I stopped him. "Tell me more about these. How about that little

china one?—the white one?" I craftily pointed out.

Of course, my good sense told me, it couldn't possibly be the one that had been taken that night from Professor Turner's desk. And yet it was an astounding thing that I should have come in contact with such a collection of toy elephants *here*.

Little Josh took out the indicated elephant and looked it over thoughtfully.

"It's hard to remember them all—but I think an aunt of Mummie's gave her this one. Oh, yes! See!—here's the date on it. Mummie was six then. I remember now."

I checked over the collection till I came to another white one, all the time kicking myself for my silly suspicions, and yet compelled to go on.

"How about this one?" I indicated.

"Say!—you *are* interested, aren't you?" he laughed.

"Is there a date on it?" I eagerly pressed.

"Well, look for yourself," he hastily handed it to me, starting off. "I just thought of something. I'll be back in a minute or two."

The elephant was tucked in my pocket on his return.

"Dinner's all ready," he told me. "Would you like to wash your hands?"

Neatly washed and combed, I guiltily followed him down, his father seating us together at the beautifully arranged table. With the thought of what I had done, and what might come out of

it if it could be proved that this was indeed the identical elephant that had been carried off that night in Madison, I can't say that I particularly enjoyed the fine meal, though I put up a good pretense.

The table talk was mostly about boys' things, first Mr. Courtland politely leading from his end and then the gracious housekeeper following from her end, a sharp ring at the front door finally calling her off.

It was Dr. Meade, but not to help Little Josh away, as planned. He had gravely called to take me back to camp, having just had an emergency call from there.

"Is somebody sick?" I anxiously asked, when we were on our way in his car.

"It's your cook, Hugo. He was just found unconscious on the beach."

"On the beach?" I gasped, my eyes, I guess, all but falling from my head. "Gee-miny-cricketsgosh! And was *he* clawed up, too?"

"Your Scoutmaster didn't say anything about claw marks. But I was urged to get there just as quickly as I could. Who is this cook?—one of your fathers?"

"No—a Madison man named George Robbins."

"George Robbins?" was repeated with surprise. "How old is he?"

"Around fifty, I imagine."

"I wonder if it's the George Robbins I went

to school with here," the doctor mused. "Is he rather short and stubbed, with prominent eyes?"

"That's him, all right. But I didn't know he was raised around here. It's queer he never mentioned it to us."

Then I thought of the old photograph.

"Say, Doc," I added. "I think I can tell you if it is your old friend."

"Yes?"

"Did the George Robbins you knew ever keep company with a girl named Alice?"

"Yes—Alice Ash—the snake woman's daughter. She died of typhoid when she was twenty, just before their intended marriage."

I told him then, with my head in a whirl, of the photograph from which I had gotten my information, trying to figure out what all these things that had so suddenly popped up could possibly mean. The china elephant! The story of the Ash boy's imprisonment! The probable remorse of the man in the big stone house! This new link now between our camp and the snake woman! And back of it all the combined riddle of the dwarf himself and the lake!

Mr. Quickley was waiting when we drew up.

"It's all over, doctor," he gravely informed. "But the coroner just phoned that he wants you to wait. He's on his way out now with a jury. The body's in a little room off the kitchen, if you wish to examine it. And now, all you boys," he spoke to us collectively, as we naturally crowded

gaping around, "please go off up in the rocks, or somewhere, till this is over. Clarence, you take charge. I'll signal you with Horace's horn when I want you back."

Our climbs before had been fun, but not now. Our thoughts were all below, with almost everyone with a different idea. There was even talk among the smaller Scouts of phoning our parents to take us home. If it wasn't a dragon in the lake, it was argued, it was something that was picking people off. One of us could easily be next.

I was on needles and pins to see Poppy, to tell him of my own amazing discovery in Bergtown, and learn to what he credited this second attack, or what change, if any, it had made in his theory. The others could talk of going home if they wanted to, but not me. Boy, things were just getting to the exciting part! I intended myself to stay to the finish.

Clarence himself growled all the way up. As long as Cookie was dead anyway, he said, we might have been let stay there to hear all about it. But I guess it was just as well that Mr. Quickley did drive us off. It *was* a morbid thing—a sudden death like that, and then an inquest—all right in our own camp.

"Did Cookie scream like Tubby?" I asked Dill Pickle, when we finally stopped in the rocks, above the hotel.

"No," he shook his head, the soberest I ever had seen him. "We were just walking along the

beach, and there he lay apparently unconscious."

"Was it where Tubby got his?"

"Pretty close to there."

"What did Poppy say about it?" I eagerly followed up.

"I didn't hear him say anything."

"Were there claw marks on Cookie, like on Tubby?"

"No. He just lay there moaning, like he had stumbled and hurt himself. But by the time we got him inside he was dead. And now, I suppose, we'll have to go back to those old burned pancakes again, like last year."

"Well, don't talk about it so soon," I shivered.

"Did you have supper in town, Spinner?"

"Yes."

"We haven't had anything here yet."

From our perch in the rocks we saw the coroner and his men come and go, taking the body with them. The doctor waited to help them out with it, then followed them off, Mr. Quickley tooting us down at dusk.

It had been determined at the inquest, he briefly reported, that Cookie had died of a sudden heart attack. Medicine found in his effects proved that he had had similar attacks before, so, while his death was regrettable, it was nothing to trouble or upset us, and he himself, Mr. Quickley concluded, was going to set the example of going ahead with our fun just as though there had been no rift in it.

CHAPTER XIII

MINGLED THEORIES

DRIVEN inside by a sudden chilling summer storm from the north, we ate supper cross-legged around the fire, our plates in our laps, Mr. Quickley later leading us in a number of noisy indoor games.

Dill Pickle, in the dish pan as usual, sang through to the last dish, Poppy and Dory helping. The storm outside now, as it swept in from the churned lake, had increased to a lashing shrieking gale. All of the windows on that side were down tight. From within it looked as though some revengeful giant with buckets without was dipping from the lake and dashing at the rattling swimming windows as fast and furiously as he could.

The games didn't interest me half as much as getting to Poppy with my story, but there was no chance yet. I'd have to wait till he finished in the kitchen.

And, boy!—was it dark outside now! All I could see, except when the lightning slashed, was the flood on the window pane.

Ned saw me at the window and came over.

"What kept you in town, Spinner?" he asked.

"A Scout I met there wanted me to stay and eat with him," I explained.

"I noticed you didn't take much on your plate to-night. I thought maybe your head was hurting you."

"No, it's almost as good as ever, the doctor told me. One more trip and I'll be through with him."

"But what are you looking at outside?" he further quizzed, trying to see himself.

"The lake, in the lightning."

"I thought maybe you were looking for dragons," he oddly laughed.

I gave him a sharp look.

"What's the matter with you?" I quickly asked.

"I'm just hoping," he nervously shrugged.

"Hoping what?" I kept at him.

"That whatever it was that killed Cookie will stay out there in the lake, and not bother us."

"He wasn't killed—you crazy kid! It was his heart. Didn't you hear Mr. Quickley say so?"

"Yes, Spinner," came lower, with a mysterious look around, "but Mr. Quickley didn't tell us everything when he called us in. There were two doctors here to-night. The other doctor came with the coroner. And *he* testified—so Smokey just whispered to me—that Cookie was scared to death."

For a second or two all I could do was stare. I had thought, coming out, that it might be an-

other attack like Tubby's, but hadn't for an instant thought of anything like *that*.

"Scared to death?" I repeated, something icy dabbing my spine. "What do you mean?"

"The two doctors didn't disagree about the actual cause of Cookie's death. It was his heart, all right. The disagreement came over what caused the heart attack. Your doctor said it just came on, while Cookie was walking along. The other doctor gave as his opinion that the attack had been brought on by something frightening."

"Boy, does this cheer a guy up!" I shivered, with another pop-eyed look out into the crowding drenched darkness.

"Smokey wasn't supposed to tell it," Ned went on, "but I quizzed it out of him. I'm not going to tell anybody outside of our own room, though. Mr. Quickley wouldn't want me to. If some of the younger Scouts heard about it, they'd throw a fit."

"And you really believe," I pinned him down, "that Cookie saw something frightening in the lake itself?"

"He was walking down the beach at the time. Either it was something in the lake or on shore—and after what happened to Tubby there, I think the lake is the best guess. Just remember, too, about those Indian stories! Indians aren't dumb. The stories must have had something back of them."

"Oh, but not real dragons!" I declared, my good sense triumphing. "For remember!—there were no tracks after Tubby's attack. Either it was something flying or thrown, or a leap by the thrower himself. Poppy thinks it's a negro."

"A negro? I never saw a negro around here."

"Naturally you wouldn't, if he was hiding."

"But whatever gave Poppy that idea?" came wonderingly.

"I can't tell you everything," I put him off, "but it could be a negro, or a man in black, with an object in hiding here. Tubby himself said it was something 'big and black' that laid him out."

"Yes, but how about the claw marks?" Ned argued.

"Just long fingernails," I airily told him.

(Boy, was I smart!)

"But look, you egg!—this didn't happen in the dark, like the other time. It was broad daylight. And if there had been a negro there, to give Cookie a scare like that, he would have told us about it—for he could still talk."

There was something to that, too.

"What did you get out of him?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"All right then!—you called *me* an egg!—how about yourself? If he had seen a dragon there, don't you suppose he would have mentioned that?"

"Well, anyway," grunted Ned, up a tree, "he saw something, and I still think it was something

living in the lake. For I heard that pig when it was pulled down! And am I glad," he shivered, as a particularly crashing blast came, with the old hotel fairly rocking on its foundations, "that I'm not swimming around out there now! Bait like that would never be passed up."

"You've just picked the wrong doctor," I told him, my good sense still sticking to me. "I'm going to stick to Dr. Meade's opinion myself."

But one way or another, with what had gone before, and now this lashing isolating storm, it sure was a shivery mess! The Scouts all felt it, too, in spite of Mr. Quickley's efforts to keep them going—their actions showed it.

The dishes finally done and put away, Dill Pickle got out a broom, Poppy at the same time mixing together the cocoa and sugar for breakfast, he and Dory having agreed to take over the complete cooking job for the balance of their stay.

"How's that, Spinner?" Dill Pickle looked proudly at the almost spotless kitchen floor.

"Fine!" complemented Mr. Quickley ahead of me, from the doorway, getting out his little red book.

Dill Pickle let out a yelp that almost brought down the piled-up dishes.

"Did you see that, Spinner?" he wildly danced. "I finally got my first good mark. Whoopee!"

"Say, aren't you ever going to get through?"

I impatiently asked Poppy, as he puttered with the cocoa.

"It's hard to mix so much without getting it either too strong or too weak. But I guess that's o-k," he declared. "It'll save time for me in the morning. Now, all I'll have to do is to pour in the milk and put it on the fire. What time did Cookie usually pile out, anyway?—do you know?"

"Around five-thirty, I guess."

"Oh, oh!" Poppy groaned. "That isn't going to be so hot. But Dory and I'll just have to make the best of it, I guess. Certainly we want to help all we can. And we can practically drop our detecting for the time being."

"Why?" I quickly asked.

For answer, he slyly slipped me a crumpled bit of paper on which had been written:

The Dwarf in Room Fourteen
The Guarded Dwarf
The Mysterious Dwarf
Murder in Room Fourteen
Shot Through the Transom
The Thrown Dagger
The Poisoned Apple
The Dwarf's Fate

"What in the world is it?" I wonderingly asked, as Poppy slyly pocketed it again.

"Notes by Cookie himself," I was quietly told.

"Honest, Poppy?" I stared.

"It's in his handwriting, all right. Dory and I proved that. We found the paper in his room after the inquest. The notes can mean but one thing, Hugo: Cookie either came here of his own volition, to finally either poison, stab or shoot the dwarf, or a higher-up in the foul plot sent him here."

"And you never gave him a thought, did you?"

"Coming with you Scouts—naturally not. An attack, if any, would come from outside, we thought. But remember, Hugo!—this is just between us four. Dory and I decided, after a quick discussion upstairs, to go on here just as though Cookie's secret had died with him. But back in Madison again, through him, we'll probably get the key to the whole riddle."

Before telling him what I knew, I wanted to learn what he thought about that silly theory of Ned's.

"Did you hear the complete testimony at the inquest?" I asked, to that point.

"Yes," he nodded.

"Well, I just heard from one of the Scouts that Cookie was scared to death."

"That's what one of the doctors tried to make us believe, but I don't take any stock in it myself, nor Dory, either. Cookie, we think, was just overtaken by a Fate that used him as roughly as he had intended using his own marked victim—when

he got through with his cat-and-mouse game. It was Cookie, of course, who attacked Tubby that night in the dark, thinking probably it was the dwarf, but learning differently after the victim was down. Then to cover up, he deliberately attracted you fellows to the lake the following night. Plenty foxy, if you ask me! If he really was scared at all to-day, it was doubtless the scare that he got from his own conscience when he knew he was going."

"Then you've completely given up your negro theory, huh?"

"That wasn't a positive theory, Hugo. I just advanced it to match Tubby's story. It was a man all right, as I told you—it just didn't happen to be a negro, that's all."

"And do you remember what you said about the pig?" I revived that.

"Not particularly. What?"

"Well, I said I didn't think a man would terrify a pig. And you said, wait till we catch the man. I thought you meant he must be terribly hideous."

"No, I probably meant that when we finally caught him, whether white or black, we'd learn why the pig had run from him into the lake, to drown there."

"Well, why *did* the pig run from him?—if it was Cookie?"

"Right there, Hugo, I'll have to admit that you have me cornered. But that's a trifling detail.

Whoever could predict what a pig would be liable to do, under any circumstances?"

"All right—so much for that," I put it away. "You've convinced me that it was Cookie. But did you know," I finally got to my own story, "that he was raised around here?"

"Why, no!" came surprised.

"Well, he was," I declared. "Further, at one time he was engaged to marry the snake woman's daughter. And now take a look at that," I pulled out my final surprise.

"The china elephant!" he stared. "Where did you get it, Hugo? In Cookie's room?"

I told him, starting with my meeting with the Courtland boy and going on in detail to the elephant's theft, his dumfounding growing as he listened.

"But what makes you so sure it's our elephant?" he asked, turning it over.

"Look at the date there," I pointed. "That's the year the dwarf was left there."

"By George! You're right! And Dory and I thought we were the detectives around here! You're the real detective, Hugo. We're just stooges, too dumb even to recognize a scoundrel right in our midst."

"You mean Cookie?"

"Of course. Guns, daggers and poison! What a foul mind he must have had. And the three of

us sleeping so peacefully, with his wicked face framed over us in our own transom!"

"Do you really believe he did that, Poppy?" I shivered.

"I most certainly do. His notes prove it. 'The Guarded Dwarf.' How could he know that, if he hadn't been spying in the dead of night? And then that other note: 'Shot Through the Transom.' But before he could deal death through there, a guarding Fate struck him down instead. I was more than half inclined to believe, too, that he was the sole agent in the plot. That's why I said, with him gone now, Dory and I could ease up. But your discovery has changed that."

"Cookie was just a tool," I declared.

"Without a doubt. So old man Courtland left a fortune, did he?" Poppy mused over that. "Well, that's exactly what I've been looking for—a motive. This property may all rightfully be Rodger's, Hugo."

"Oh, boy!—I hope so!"

"And this repentent-eyed man you've been telling me about may be the one who actually hid the dwarf away—probably stealing him from his crib, with the lie that the unfortunate baby was his own. And the china elephant!—of course, he knew someone who would enjoy getting it! Maybe he already had married her. And needing a tool, to carry out his foul plot, he hired one he had grown

up with. Piece by piece it goes together perfectly."

"Sure thing—just like a jigsaw puzzle," I agreed.

"But to foully plot, through a tool, to finally murder the boy, after all his years of hidden-away misery! It doesn't seem possible of a man such as you have described—and with a boy of his own! But to-morrow I'm going to get the facts. And who knows!—maybe by to-morrow night the whole mystery will have been cleared up, with Rodger, plainly brought here by Fate, coming into his own. And having done so well with this, Hugo, how would you like another little detecting job?"

"Swell!" I jumped at the chance.

"Well, I want to know if Cookie went to your Scoutmaster to get his job, or if the job sought him. To match my theory, *he* must have gone after the job. Find out to-night and let me know."

Dill Pickle weakly weaved in here.

"Woe is me!" he groaned, tragically rolling his eyes. "Woe is me!"

"What have you got yourself into now?" I asked wisely.

"I lost my good mark, Spinner."

"How?"

"I was balancing a baseball bat on my nose, intending to let it tip off on Tubby, for fun, but

Mr. Quickley got it instead. Boy, you should have heard it crack! And has he got a bump up there! Oh, oh! But I got the Scouts to laughing, anyway. That was my aim."

"Honest, Dill Pickle," I told him, "I'm hoping some day to find out the truth about you."

"What truth?"

"Whether you're unlucky or just plain dumb."

He guardedly peeked around.

"I just wanted to make sure that Tubby wasn't listening—for I'd never admit this in front of him. But your last guess, Spinner, was the right one. I *am* dumb. I was born dumb. I get up dumb in the morning and go to bed dumb at night. And look at my record here! 'Pots and pans for you, Richard!' " he weakly mimicked. "You fellows have been having all the fun and I've been doing the dirty work—saving *your* clothes, and smutting up my own. Helping *you* get awards and losing every chance myself. Could you imagine anything dumber than that? And then to-night—I didn't have to do the dishes, but after what happened I thought everybody ought to pitch in and do a little extra. So I pitched in—poor dumb me! I *did* get a good mark—but I was too dumb to keep it. That's the whole dumb story. Dill Pickle, the champion dumb-bell! I'm even dumb to be telling you this. But if to-morrow morning I could start all over again, do you know what I'd do?"

"I know what *I'd* do in your place. Having learned my lesson, I'd change my ways."

"Well, I wouldn't," he swaggered, his shoulders back. "I'd start all over again having all the fun I could and making all the fun possible around me. And if it'd help you fellows to do your dishes for you, I'd do them. In other words," he recklessly swaggered off, "I like being dumb."

"Just a minute, Richard," Mr. Quickley colared him in the doorway. "You're the cause of this swelling—so get busy, with some cold water, and bathe it for me."

"Can I?" came eagerly. "Oh, gee!"

And away he flew into the rain for the required water, coming back drenched.

"I didn't expect you to run out into the rain, Richard," Mr. Quickley told him.

"Oh, that's all right," he flew around. "I'm sorry, Mr. Quickley. I didn't mean to pop you. And I'm going to get that mark back to-morrow, if I can."

"What made you think you'd lost it?" he was quietly asked.

"Well, after smacking you—"

"Oh, rats! Don't you suppose I knew why you were putting on that balancing act!"

It was after ten now and time for bed, with the storm still banging away outside. Ordinarily this would have helped us to sleep, as there's music of a sort in rain on the window and roof. But to-

night, I knew, it would just sound like a new ghost clattering around.

Mr. Quickley was in Cookie's room folding the blankets there when I went up.

"He was a good friend, Hugo," I was told quietly. "I'm going to miss him. He was a good friend of you boys, too. What he did here he did without a penny's pay. He just wanted to help you, he said."

"Did you ask him to come, Mr. Quickley?" I inquired.

"No, he volunteered—the night before we started."

"I suppose he knew who all were coming," I led on.

"Yes—the names were all in the evening newspaper."

"The Cash boy's name, too?"

"I think so."

Which was the information I quietly passed on to Poppy, wondering myself how such a smart man as Mr. Quickley could have been so completely deceived.

I was still wondering about it when I finally dropped off.

CHAPTER XIV

AN EXCITING NIGHT

TUBBY boiled in at two demanding his blanket.

"I know who the smart guy is around here," he glowered at Dill Pickle. "And if I don't get my blanket back, there's going to be trouble."

"The boy's crazy!" Dill Pickle wildly clutched his own tousled head.

"You'll think I'm crazy," Tubby came up another ferocious step, his jaw squared, "if you don't give up that blanket. This is your last warning, you fugitive from a baboon cage."

"Well, well, well!" jeered Dill Pickle. "If it isn't old hippo himself! But what do *you* want of a blanket?—all you need is a tank, hippo. So go on back where you belong and dive in."

"Yes," I chimed in, "go on and get out of here and let us sleep. We haven't got your blanket, Tubby."

"I wasn't talking to you, Frey," he still glowered accusingly at Dill Pickle. "I know who's got it, all right. And I'm going to stay right here till I get it—or take monkey-face over there apart."

"You and who else?" bridled Dill Pickle.

"Listen, little and looney!—if I ever smacked you you'd spin till next Christmas. So don't start

anything with me, unless you're ready for your first harp lesson."

"Yes," Dill Pickle came right back at him, "and if I ever went at you with both fists, you'd think a Kansas cyclone was working on you."

"Yah!" hooted Tubby. "Something with a lot of air, huh?—*hot* air!"

"Boy!" giggled Dill Pickle. "That wasn't half bad. Maybe you'll start growing a brain yet, hollow-head."

"It's a cinch," Tubby fired back, "I never saw any bumps on your head, from anything crowding inside. But I want my blanket," he bellowed.

"If you've got it," I growled across to Dill Pickle, anxious to stop the crazy bickering and get to sleep again, "for Pete's sake give it up to the big baby—or the first thing you know you'll have him crying."

Mr. Quickley blinked in then.

"What's all this loud talk about?" he crossly demanded. "And why have you boys got your light on? You know that's against the rules."

"Ask Tubby," I told him. "He's the one who turned it on—not us."

"What's the meaning of this, Horace?" Tubby then got the attack.

"I'm looking for my blanket," he pouted.

"Have any of you boys got his blanket?" asked Mr. Quickley, suspecting a trick.

"I haven't," I denied, shrugging.

"Nor me," Ned and Bobbie denied together.

"How about you, Richard?" came sharply.

"Have you got Horace's blanket?"

"Is it a green and red Indian blanket?" Dill Pickle asked innocently.

"You know blamed well it is," Tubby growled, his cheeks puffed.

"With a hole in one corner?"

"Yes, it has a hole in one corner—and I want it."

"And is one edge frayed?"

"You know all about it, all right. I knew it was you who yanked it off and then ran with it—thinking I was asleep."

"Where is it, Richard?" Mr. Quickley demanded. "Let me have it."

"I can't give it to you, Mr. Quickley," Dill Pickle gave a helpless gesture.

"Why not?"

"Because I haven't got it."

"But you just described it."

"I remembered it from last year," Dill Pickle smiled sweetly.

"Don't you let him fool you, Mr. Quickley," Tubby blatted in. "He wouldn't know that much about it if he didn't have it."

"Richard, for the last time!—have you got that blanket, or not?"

"No, honest, Mr. Quickley," Dill Pickle earnestly wagged.

"Is it in this room?"

"No, sir—not that I know of."

"I bet it is," Tubby hung on.

"What makes you so certain, Horace?"

"Oh!" he growled, with a final spiteful look at Dill Pickle. "Skip it. I'll find another blanket some place."

"Yes," Dill Pickle promptly peeled off his own, "take mine. I'll sleep with Spinner."

"I ought to keep it," glowered Tubby, as he waddled off with it, Mr. Quickley following.

Poppy came in then.

"What's the matter?" he sleepily inquired. "What's all the fuss about over here?"

"Oh," laughed Dill Pickle, "Tubby lost one of his blankets, and I got the blame as usual."

"And he had to wait till we were all asleep to start looking for it, huh?" came the growl.

"It was just pulled off, he said."

"Boy, it's stuffy in here!" Poppy wryly sniffed. "Why don't you raise your window?"

"We put it down on account of the storm," I told him.

"There isn't any storm now. It's all over with."

"I'll raise it," Dill Pickle obligingly ran over.

"What do you see?" I anxiously asked, as he stood looking out.

"The stars! Oh, boy!—is it ever swell out again. And smell that air! Um!"

"Oh, quit your smelling and come on to bed,"

Ned sleepily growled down, as the door closed after Poppy. "Good night nurse!—I feel as though I hadn't had any sleep at all. If there's anything I hate it's to be jerked out like this in the middle of the night. That crazy Tubby! And probably his blanket is under his bunk all the time—that's how dumb he is!"

"Yes," agreed Dill Pickle, as he switched off the light and got in behind me, "the fellows wouldn't start anything at this time of night—especially after Cookie just dying."

"Well, don't start talking about that," I shivered.

"Do you believe in ghosts, Spinner?" Ned tittered down in the dark.

"And now *you're* trying to get funny! Shut up, and go to sleep," I told him.

Did I believe in ghosts! Of course, I didn't believe in ghosts. But after all that had gone before, there was no comfort in the crazy thought that maybe a new ghost was floating around through our keyholes, with cold feet.

But of all the crazy thoughts! A ghost stealing a blanket! It was one of the other fellows, of course—or the blanket had just dropped off, as Ned said.

The others were soon off again, even to the point of snoring, but some peculiar restlessness that I couldn't explain kept me turning. Did I believe in ghosts! Dog-gone it!—why couldn't

I get that crazy thought out of my head! There weren't any ghosts around. There weren't any ghosts anywhere, for that matter. Or even if there were, what ghost would be silly enough to go around yanking blankets? Certainly, not Cookie's ghost, for he had blankets of his own. They were folded neatly on his bed—I had seen Mr. Quickley put them there. But what a shock I'd get, came the further crazy thought, if I went in there now and found them unfolded, with something shivering under them, and Tubby's blanket there, too!

Did ghosts ever go back to their old beds that way? Oh, rats!—more wild thoughts! I never would get to sleep, I told myself disgustedly, if I kept letting truck like that clutter up my mind. A better plan would be to start counting sheep. But even that was too silly to do, I decided. I was just doing too much tossing and turning—that was all. If I'd lie still I'd soon drop off.

So I nested in as comfortably as I could and grimly stuck to it. It began to work, too. Things got hazier and hazier. And then—

Jumpin' Jupiter! Had I imagined it, or had our door quietly opened? It was too dark to see. But a sudden draft through the room told me that something bigger than the transom was open at that end. And then it came! Gosh!—just telling it gives me goose pimples from tip to toe. A scarier thing never happened to me.

There was a slight twitch of the top blanket, as someone or *something* got a firm grip on it—then away it flew, with a sudden quick jerk, with me so scared by it that I couldn't screech, gurgle or anything else. I was like an icicle. But the screech came right after, and in response to it the scarest bunch of Boy Scouts you ever set eyes on. Even Mr. Quickley was white. As for poor Ned and Bobbie right over me, and poor Dill Pickle directly beside me, it was their later story that it took them two full days to completely get over it.

Looking back, I can see how silly I was that night. After all the other tricks that had been played back and forth, I should have instantly suspected one of my chums, and not a ghost. But I've tried to tell you just what led up to the crazy screech. First it was Cookie's death and the storm; then that ghost crack of Ned's; and then those crazy wakeful thoughts of mine.

Anyway, I screeched—and *how* I screeched! In fact I was still screeching when they got there, first Mr. Quickley, then Donnie and Clarence with the others pop-eyed behind them, and finally Poppy and Dory from across the hall.

"What's the matter in here?" anxiously cried Mr. Quickley, switching on the light. Then seeing it was me, he ran over. "What's the matter, Hugo?"

"Someone just stole our blanket, too," I chattered it out to him.

"Who was it?" he sharply asked. "Did you see?"

"No, it was too dark. But I think it was Cookie."

"Cookie?" he stared. "Say, are you awake, Hugo, or are you still dreaming?"

"It wasn't any dream," I shivered.

"But what happened, anyway?"

"I just told you—Cookie stole our blanket."

"But Cookie's dead."

"Yes," Donnie put in, starting to grin again, "hadn't you found that out yet, Hugo?"

"Where's Horace?" Mr. Quickley sharply looked around.

"Here I am," he stepped out.

"Is this some of your work, Horace?"

"No—honest, Mr. Quickley."

"Have you found your own blanket yet?"

"No, sir."

"Donald!—do you know anything about this?"

"No, sir."

"How about you, Clarence?"

"No, sir."

"And, Wesley?"

"No, sir."

Smokey then wedged in half dressed.

"Who screamed?" he anxiously asked.

"Me," I told him.

"What happened?"

"Cookie just stole our blanket."

"Oh, it wasn't either Cookie!" Mr. Quickley irritably corrected. "It was one of your own chums, of course. And now, boys," he added, "get back to bed—all of you—and see that you stay there the rest of the night. Any Scout caught out of bed again will lose all his stars. We've had enough of this nonsense for one night."

"I thought someone up here was being murdered," Smokey jerkily laughed.

"Maybe someone will be—next," I shivered.

"Oh, Hugo!" snapped Mr. Quickley, completely out of patience with me. "Will you quit that silly talk? What's become of your good sense, anyway?"

"He never had any," someone tittered from the hall, followed by a general scramble to get out of sight.

Mr. Quickley, after clearing the hall, got us one of his own blankets.

"Take that and get to bed," he tossed it to us.

"But won't you need it yourself?" I asked meekly, realizing now what a dunce I'd been.

"I'll get one of Cookie's," he started off.

"May I stay with the boys a few minutes, Mr. Quickley?" Poppy requested.

"If you don't stay too long," the consent was given. "They've missed enough sleep as it is."

I'll have a loggy lot on my hands to-morrow."

Poppy closed the door and then came over grinning.

"We'll have to get you some nerve tonic, Hugo," he laughed.

"Or a gag," sourly put in Bobbie.

"Were you dreaming of ghosts?" I was asked.

"No."

"Then where did you get the idea it was a ghost that took your blanket?"

"Oh," growled Ned, "he just wanted to scare us."

"I didn't, either," I denied. "I really thought it was a ghost."

"I believe you—from that screech!" put in Dill Pickle. "There was nothing made up about it. If the devil himself had been after me, I couldn't have been scareder. What did *you* think of it, Poppy?"

"The same as Smokey—that it was murder," Poppy laughed. "But what are you pointing at, Ned?"

"That dent up there in the ceiling. That's where I hit, when the screech came."

"And was *I* scared!" Bobbie got in, rolling his eyes. "Wough!"

"Poppy!" Mr. Quickley here called from the hall. "Come out here a minute, will you?"

"Coming," Poppy called, hurrying out.

Ned stretched for the light cord.

"Now, let's go back to sleep," he yawned, as the light went out. "And for Pete's sake, Spinner!—if you get another mosquito bite, don't jar the roof loose."

It was getting daylight now. The birds already were weakly chirping. I probably wouldn't get any sleep at all, I disconsolately told myself, as I further turned and tossed. But finally I dropped off, with the others, Poppy telling me when I came down, after the usual get-up call, why Mr. Quickley had called him into the hall.

"We had a visitor last night, Hugo—and not a ghostly one, either. Mr. Quickley thinks it was some sneak thief. But knowing what I do, I have other ideas. It was either another tool, or the Bergtown man himself. Everything that Cookie left was spirited away—blankets and all. When Mr. Quickley went to get them, there was nothing there."

"And is that where my blanket went, too?—and Tubby's?" I asked, dumfounded.

"It would seem so. It doesn't make sense though, does it?"

"Hardly. Cookie's things were taken to hide his secret, of course. But there was no object in taking our blankets, too."

"It is puzzling. I'm sure, though, I'm on the right track—there's just some angle I haven't picked up yet. But maybe I'll have it all before noon. And while I'm gone, help us keep an eye

on Rodger, will you? He may be in more danger now than ever. Dory will be here, of course. But I'll feel better if I know you're helping, too."

"I'll keep at his elbow every minute," I promised.

"And keep him out of the woods this morning, Hugo."

"O-k," I promised.

The others that morning scattered all over the landscape, but I kept close to the hotel myself, Poppy driving off at nine and returning at eleven.

But before he could tell me anything, we were drawn to the beach by the old snake woman. Dory spotted her first. She was acting queerly, he said. When Poppy and I got there she was standing over the remnants of a fire that she had built on the spot where Tubby had been struck down.

When she finally went off toward home, Poppy ran up and pawed through the burned grass and twigs left there.

"So that's what it was, eh?" he oddly laughed. "And I thought it was Cookie! No wonder the poor pig ran for its life. But I never dreamed of anything as simple as this."

"What are you talking about?" I eagerly asked. "Tell me."

"Not now, Hugo," he put me off, with a thoughtful look off into the hills. "But before the day is over I think I can promise you one of the most amazing stories you ever heard. I know

now what struck Tubby down, and why. I know why the pig ran into the lake. I think I know, too, who Rodger is, and who put him away. But there's still a few gaps left to fill. I want to do that first, and then I'll tell you it all."

"Hey, Spinner!" one of the Scouts here called from the hotel. "You're wanted up here."

"Who wants me?" I called back. "Mr. Quickley?"

"No—some boy you met in Bergtown. He just rode in on his bike."

Little Josh!

"It's the boy I stole the elephant from," I quickly told Poppy. "Do you want to meet him?"

"The Courtland boy, eh?" came back excitedly. "I'll tell the world I want to meet him. Oh, boy, is this a break! He can help me a lot with those gaps, Hugo. Lead me to him."

CHAPTER XV

BACK TO THE SNAKE FARM

"I WISH you could stay all night," I told Little Josh, when we were clearing the dinner table.

"So do I," he spoke longingly.

"Well, why don't you phone your father and ask him?" I eagerly suggested.

"Oh, he'd just say no," came evasively.

"We'll take good care of you. And to-night we'll have a circus. Go on and call him up," I urged. "Gee! I'd give anything if you could stay."

"Do you always have to gather up the dirty dishes, Hugo?" he asked.

"No, we take turns. And to-day I have to wash, too. Oof!"

"I'll do it for you," he eagerly offered.

"You can wipe if you want to," I consented to that. "We'll get through that much quicker. And then I wish you *would* call up your dad. He can't any more than say no."

"Oh, yes he can, Hugo," came with a nervous laugh. "He can make me come home right away. I don't want that to happen. I came out to have some fun. So let me stay."

"Doesn't he know where you are?" I asked surprised.

"No."

"Oh, but you shouldn't have deceived him," I lectured.

"I suppose not," he shrugged. "But, gee!—there's no harm in it. He lets me go other places with the Scouts. I don't know why I shouldn't be permitted to come out here, if I want to. He just acts silly about it, I think."

"Who acts silly?" asked Poppy, as we unloaded in the dish pan.

"Oh, my father—sometimes!" came quietly. "The one place I'd rather go, he won't let me."

"And where's that?"

"Out here. I had to make him think I was going some place else to-day."

"But wasn't he raised around here himself?" Poppy pretended just the right amount of surprise.

"Yes. But he hates it here now."

"That's odd. I suppose you heard about our cook dying."

"Yes. I heard about it in town."

"He was raised around here, too. Maybe your father knew him."

"Maybe."

"His name was Robbins—George Robbins."

"I never heard Daddy mention him. But he may have known him. He never talks much about the people he grew up with."

"I thought maybe Mr. Robbins had been in to see your dad lately."

"I don't think so."

"He was a short bald-headed man with noticeable eyes."

"I don't remember seeing him."

"Does your dad know many people in Madison?"

"I never heard him mention any by name."

"Not even Mr. Robbins, eh?"

"No."

"We had a bad fire in Madison just before we left," Poppy took a new tack, having failed to establish any connection between Cookie and the believed instigator. "In fact, that little crippled boy you met at dinner almost was caught in the fire. It was a sanitarium. The man who owned it was burned to death."

"Gee! That's too bad," came sympathetically, but with no particular interest.

"What was his name now, Hugo?" Poppy purposely studied.

"Professor Irvin Turner," I supplied.

"Oh, sure! That's the name. Professor Irvin Turner. Rather a striking name, too. Anybody hearing it *should* remember it."

Little Josh broke into a funny laugh.

"You and I would make a pretty good team," he told Poppy.

"What do you mean?" Poppy stared.

"Uncle Ben says I'm the worst talker *he* ever knew. But you're pretty good yourself."

"Is that a hint for me to shut up?" Poppy wryly asked.

"Oh, no!" came hastily. "I didn't mean it that way. I like talkers."

"Is your dad much of a talker?" the adroit questioning continued.

"Daddy? Goodness, no! Sometimes he'll sit for hours, just studying."

"Worried, eh?"

"I didn't say *that*," Little Josh stiffened slightly. "But I guess," he softly added, "he *does* worry about me. I'm sick a lot. Owning things may make worries, too."

Yes, I thought to myself, and so would stealing things from others, especially from a helpless infant.

In a way, I felt guilty—helping to lead the unsuspecting boy along—and such a friendly boy, too. But it had to be done. For all we learned, though, we might just as well have quizzed a stump.

"Well, how are your gaps now?" I slyly asked Poppy, at the end of the kitchen work.

"Still gapping," he shrugged.

"Fine kid, isn't he?"

"They don't make 'em any better. It's going to hit him hard, too, if things work out the way I think."

"But he'd rather have it that way, if it's the right way," I showed my confidence in him.

"He won't mind the property loss so much as his shattered faith in his father. That's the thing that's going to cut him. And that really is what's troubling the father, Hugo. He's in constant fear that the boy—the one person whose love and respect he treasures the most—some day will learn the truth about him."

"Where will your gaps take you next?" I quizzed.

"Either back to town or up to the old snake woman's place. And remember!—you're to keep an eye on Rodger till I get back."

"Okey-dokey," I promised.

Dory and Little Josh were outside washing dish towels, which later were spread in the hot sun to dry, Dory then going lazily off with a book.

"Do you know what I'd like to do this afternoon?" Rodger wistfully suggested, when Little Josh and I joined him on the shady front porch.

"What?" I asked.

"I'd like to climb up and see that old woman's stuffed birds."

"The climb would be fun," I told him.

"But wouldn't you like to see the birds, too?" he asked, excited even by the thought of it.

"I doubt if she'd show them to us—after what she said yesterday. Still, she may have changed her mind overnight."

"Do you think Dory would be willing to make the climb again, after my actions yesterday?" came sheepishly.

"I imagine so," I laughed.

"I sure was a big baby. I'm still ashamed of it."

"Oh, forget it. He has. So has everybody else."

"Who do you mean by Dory?" Little Josh then asked. "One of those two big Scouts?"

"Yes—the red-headed one."

"But why should we have to take him along? I'd rather just the three of us went."

"You wouldn't dare," I told him.

"Give me the chance—and I'll show you," he grimly waggled.

"But what would your father say?"

"He'd have seventeen cat-fits, of course. But I'd just like to prove to him that he's all wrong about that old snake woman. I've been talking to Uncle Ben about her, and *he* says she wouldn't harm a hair of my head. Besides, I've always wanted to see her snakes. So let's go up, Hugo, while I've got the chance. Come on."

"It's o-k by me," I told him.

"And by me, too," Rodger eagerly endorsed.

Dory, when asked, said that he was too lazy to go. But we could go ourselves, he quickly consented, at sight of our dropped faces, if we'd promise to keep together. And getting similar per-

mission from Mr. Quickley, we merrily set forth.

Little Josh talked all the way up—about the unusual rocks and trees, and once, when we were resting, about the hotel below that his grandfather had built and operated so profitably.

“How long has your grandpa been dead?” I asked him.

“Sixteen years.”

Sixteen years! And Rodger was eighteen!

“Did you ever have any aunts or uncles?” I further inquired, hoping to turn up something.

“Yes—I had a half aunt—Aunt Marie.”

“A *half* aunt?” I laughed. “And what was the other half?”

“Don’t be silly! She was my father’s half sister. He seldom mentions her, though. I think something sad happened to her. She’s buried in Bergtown. She died one year and Grandpa the next.”

“Was she married?”

“I don’t know.”

“But wouldn’t it say on her tombstone?”

“It just says: ‘Beloved daughter of Joshua and Lydia Courtland.’ ”

“Then your grandpa must have been married twice,” I figured.

“He was. My own father’s mother died when he was seven.”

“Is your second grandmother still living?”

“Grandma Lydia? Oh, no! She died before

Grandpa himself. But aren't you asking a lot of questions?" came a trifle stiffly. "You're almost as bad as Poppy."

"It's all right, isn't it?" I innocently countered.

"I suppose so. But I wouldn't question you that way."

"You belong to a more interesting family than me," I told him. "All my grandparents ever owned was a dinky little farm. They didn't own half the state like this, and a hotel and even a whole lake. I bet your grandpa got plenty for it, huh?—from the state?"

"I suppose so. But let's change the subject," he shrugged.

If Poppy and I were right, Rodger not only belonged in the Courtland family, but was the rightful heir to the extensive estate. But where did he come in? Had the half aunt been secretly married?—and had her baby been stolen from her by her grasping older half brother? It must be something like that, I concluded.

Then I checked over those dates again. Rodger was eighteen. When he was a year old the half aunt had died—and if we were right about her, probably of a broken heart. Then a year later the grandfather had died, the family property (which should have been Rodger's—or at least half of it) all going to the scheming older son. And now, here were the two boys principally involved

—the cheated one and the gainer—merrily climbing together with not the least inkling of the family bond between them.

As Poppy had said, certainly it was all the workings of a merciful and just Fate!

"Is this the place?" curiously asked Little Josh, when it finally came into sight over the hill.

"This is it," I told him.

"Where are the snakes?"

"In boxes somewhere, I suppose—or in pits."

Rodger had caught sight of something in a little pond in back.

"Oh, look!" he excitedly danced, clutching my hand. "Oh, look, Spinner! Swans! Two black swans! Aren't they beauties?"

"But I thought swans were white," I stared.

"The only swans in Europe were white till some explorers discovered these black ones in Australia. They're more vicious than the white ones. When they're nesting or setting they'll even attack a grown man. But I want to see them closer," he pulled on my hand. "Come on."

The old snake woman saw us and came running.

"Oh, no, no!" she warned. "Don't go any closer, boys. They're liable to fly at you."

"Do you have white swans, too?" Rodger asked her.

"Not now. And I'm going to get rid of these before another spring. They're too vicious and

too much of a worry. When they're nesting I have to watch them all the time. And they wander off too much. It's their wild nature. But what brought you boys back again? I thought I begged you to stay away for a few days."

"I wanted to see your stuffed birds," Rodger eagerly told her. "You see," he ran on, "that's my hobby, too—only mine all burned up. I'm going to start a new collection, though. Have you any whippoorwills? I've always wanted a whippoorwill."

"Yes," her kindly eyes lit up, "I have a male whippoorwill."

"They're around here every night, but it's too dark to shoot them then. How did you get yours? Did you snare it?"

"It's been so long ago I really don't recall. But probably it was my son who brought it in. I haven't taken much interest in my collection since—since my son's trouble. My poor persecuted boy! And last night he was out in all that storm!"

"You mean—in the woods?" Little Josh stupidly asked.

She hadn't particularly noticed him till then. But now, as she plainly recognized him, her face hardened.

"Maybe we better go," I tried to hurry him off.

"But I want to see the snakes," he held back.

"And what if one of them should strike you?" she harshly asked. "Would I be thrown into

prison, along with my son, because of it? Or would such an attack on a member of the *great* Courtland branch justify even hanging?"

"You don't like me, do you?" he faced her simply.

"No! And I'm surprised at your daring in coming here. Haven't you been told that the revengeful old snake woman was just biding her time to kill you?"

But he never flinched.

"Why should you want to kill me?" he asked simply. "I've never done you any harm."

"How old are you?" she asked.

"Thirteen."

"I've often seen you in town. The first time you were an infant in a carriage. And do you know what I was tempted to do to you? I was tempted to steal you, and secretly kill you."

"But you're glad now you didn't, aren't you?" he forced a smile.

"Yes," she said slowly, the fire dying in her eyes. "I'm glad. What was done is all in the past. To seek revenge now would just make matters worse. You have nothing to fear from me—ever."

"And now can we see your snakes?" he eagerly asked.

"If you wish," she consented.

"I'd rather see your stuffed birds," put in Rodger. "I hate snakes."

"Then I wouldn't look at them, if I were you," she advised. "The birds are inside, if you care to go in ahead of us."

"Yes," I told him, "you go on inside and we'll come in later."

A familiar light-blue roadster came in from the south while we were looking at the snakes.

"Thank heaven!" came fervently from the old woman.

"It's one of our older Scouts," I told her, wondering what she was so thankful about.

Her expression changed.

"Oh! I thought it was the officers coming for my son. And I was so glad that this time I could tell them that he had started back of his own accord."

Poppy came up staring.

"Say! What are you fellows doing here?" he went at us. "I thought Mrs. Ash told you to keep away from here."

"Then what are *you* doing here?" I slyly countered.

He caught sight of the big swans.

"Oh, there they are! And have they finally decided to nest at home, Mrs. Ash?"

"I think so. Certainly I hope so. It's no easy task following them around destroying their nests."

I quickly caught Poppy's grinning eye.

"Then that was a nest—" I began.

"Yes," he nodded, picking up, "that was a nest that she destroyed this morning on the beach. And the 'big black thing' that knocked Tubby down was the swans that you see over there. Simple, isn't it? But that's what bewildered us. It was too simple. It wasn't till this morning that I suspected the truth. Though repeatedly driven out of there, the swans were determined to nest there. Then along came Tubby. In flying off, they furiously flew at him, scratching him with their powerful wings, and then attacking the pig, driving it squealing into the lake where it drowned."

"Good-by dragons!" I jerkily laughed.

"You and your old dragons! Bewildered as I was over it, I wasn't silly enough to believe that. And now, Mrs. Ash, may I see you alone? I have some good news for you."

The eagerness in her worn wrinkled face was pitiable.

"You mean—about my son?"

"Partly," nodded Poppy. "And partly about your grandson."

"My grandson?" she slowly repeated, staring. "But he's dead. It was for his death that my—my son—"

"Yes, I know, Mrs. Ash," Poppy gently interrupted. "But a grave injustice was done your son. Let us go into the house now and I'll tell you all about it."

CHAPTER XVI

THE TRUTH AT LAST

LITTLE JOSH quietly studied me with hurt troubled eyes as we waited.

"What's the matter?" I finally asked him, uncomfortable under it. "Why do you keep looking at me that way?"

"I'm trying to figure out," came steadily, his eyes never wavering from mine, "why you and Poppy asked me all those questions. I thought at the time it was just inquisitiveness. But I can see now that you had a motive. That's true, isn't it, Hugo?"

"Ask Poppy when he comes out," I evaded.

"And that's something else that puzzles me," he steadily went on. "In the short time that you and Poppy have been here you've learned more about old Mrs. Ash's affairs than I've learned in my whole lifetime here. That didn't just happen. Don't try to make me think that it did, either, for I know better. Boy Scouts, with all their helpfulness, don't get into things that deep that quick. It would almost look as though you had come here purposely to help her."

"We never had heard of her till yesterday," I truthfully told him.

"But you *are* helping her now," he persisted.

"Poppy is," was my guarded reply.

"I'm getting suspicious of you, Hugo. First you and Poppy ask me a lot of pointed questions about Daddy. Then Poppy shows up here plainly on the old woman's side. I still don't believe that Daddy caused their trouble, whatever it is—he's too kind and considerate. But evidently she's made you boys believe that. And now you act as though you're trying to prove it against him."

"We suspect him," I admitted.

"Suspect him of what?" came hotly.

"You'll have to get that from Poppy, too."

"I'm going," he started off. "Good-by, Hugo."

"Don't you want me to go with you?" I asked.

"No," he shook his head, the look in his eyes now cutting me to the quick. "I want to say good-by to you here. And it is good-by—forever. I never want to see you again. You aren't the friend I thought. And if you ever do anything against Daddy, never as long as I live will I forgive you."

"But what if he admits himself that he did someone else a terrible wrong?" I asked.

"Daddy?" came scornfully. "Don't be silly."

And off he went, his confidence in his father unshaken, finally disappearing over the hill, leaving me almost wishing for an instant or two that I never had gotten into the tangle against him.

Then, as I thought of all that the dwarf had

suffered, I was more grimly determined than ever to stand by him to the finish. Any man who would do that to a baby to line his own pockets, I savagely told myself, had the heart of a beast, and deserved getting severely punished for it. Still, it was a shame, I had to concede in final, that an innocent son would have to suffer, too—particularly such a fine friendly trusting son.

"It's too tearful in there for me," Poppy told me, finally coming out, misty-eyed himself.

"What happened?" I quickly asked.

"Well," he countered, "what would you expect to happen when a love-starved boy and his grandmother, who had long believed him dead, were suddenly reunited?"

"Then Rodger is her grandson?" I excitedly asked.

"Beyond all doubt. And now they're in there, locked in each other's arms, the happiest pair the world has ever known. He has a home at last, and now she'll soon have her son back."

"But how did you find out that he was her grandson?" I curiously quizzed.

"By putting two and two together."

"Where did you get the two and two?"

"Mostly from a talkative barber in Bergtown. Dropping in for a hair-cut, I casually led the conversation around to the Courtlands, getting a long-winded account of them and their doings—but boiled down, Hugo, here is the story: The

principals in it are Old Joshua Courtland himself, his son Harlow by his first wife, his daughter Marie by his second wife, and unfortunate Jerry Ash. Got that set in your mind?"

"Sure thing. And what's the rest?"

"Never able to get along with his tricky son, Old Joshua put him out of the hotel below when Jerry Ash married into the family, putting the favored young son-in-law in charge of the business instead. In time a baby boy was born to the happy young couple. Named Joshua Courtland Ash, after the pleased grandparent, the baby later was stolen from its crib and, as you and I know, spirited off to Madison and hidden there."

"Yes—we know all about that."

"To the people around here, though, it was made to appear that the child had been stolen and murdered by its own father. The body, of course, never was recovered. But baby clothes were picked up in the woods below beside a shallow empty grave. Also the father's cap was found there and a spade containing his fingerprints. It was proved at the later trial, too, that he had actually stolen his own child. His wife had seen him climbing out of a window with it. So, though the tiny body never was found, he was sentenced lightly for the supposed crime and taken off to prison."

"But wait a minute!" I flagged. "You're getting me all tangled up. Do you mean to tell me,

Poppy, that it was the baby's own father who hid him away?"

"Not at all, Hugo. That was the work of Harlow Courtland, as I hope soon to prove. The night it happened, Jerry Ash was too drunk himself to know what he actually did. That was his one bad fault."

"Drinking?"

"Yes. Except for it, he was a fine manly fellow. His wife, who died the next year of a broken heart, often chided him about his weakness, and one time, after a particularly disgraceful spree (all the work of the scheming older brother, I think), she had ordered him away, telling him to stay away till he could behave like a man."

"Go on."

"But instead of bracing up, he foolishly went back to the tavern, where the scheming brother-in-law no doubt put the idea into his head of revenging himself at home by stealing and hiding his own infant son. Of course, I didn't hear all this in town, Hugo. As I told you, I put two and two together. The barber furnished one two, and what I knew and figured out provided the other—the two adding up perfectly."

"It must have been a hard job adding up two and two—and without a college education, too," I slipped in.

"Say! Do you want to hear this or not?"

"Sure thing. Go on, Poppy."

"The people around here still think that murder was committed that tragic night, the poor duped (and maybe drugged) husband even believing it himself. His remorse at the trial, I was told, was pitiable. His only defence was that he had been too drunk to know what he was doing. He couldn't even remember where the body had been finally buried, he said. It never occurred to anyone there that after *he* had stolen the baby, someone else, scheming for the whole Courtland fortune, had taken the young heir out of its staggering parent's arms and hid it. Taking the facts here, and what we know, it makes a perfect picture. Rodger Cash, as we have been calling him, is really Joshua Courtland Ash. I believe it, you believe it—I hope!—and Mrs. Ash believes it. It just remains for us to make the man responsible for all the misery confess."

"How are you going to do that, Poppy?" I breathlessly asked.

"By first appealing to his sense of justice. Time may have changed him a lot, Hugo. From your description of him, I think it has. But if we fail in getting a voluntary confession, Mrs. Ash is going to throw the whole case into the courts and let them fight it out."

Tubby wheezed in here.

"Have you seen him, Spinner?" he guardedly asked, in that snooply eager way of his, poking his nose around.

"Seen who?" I countered.

"The jailbird. He's the guy who snitched our blankets last night. He slept there all night, too."

"Slept where?" I stared.

"In that little room off the kitchen. We just found the blankets there with a note, thanking us for them. I just read the note myself and it was signed: 'Jerry Ash.' I thought I'd come up and get a look at him. I never saw a jailbird before."

"You can see a better freak," I told him, "if you go home and look in your own mirror. And quit calling him a jailbird. We don't like that—do we, Poppy?"

"No. But I'm wondering if it really was him."

"It probably was, all right. His mother just told us that he was out in the storm—or at least she thought he was."

"He climbed in a window," Tubby further contributed.

"And I thought it was a ghost snooping around!" I jerkily laughed.

"Yes," haw-hawed Tubby, "weren't you dumb?"

"Well, you shouldn't mind a little competition," I handed back. "But go on home and wash your feet. Maybe you'll find that pair of socks you lost last winter. And when we get home ourselves we'll tell you a bedtime story."

"Joke over," he haw-hawed again.

Boy, was he ever the humorous little thing!

"Did you think that one up all by yourself?" I pleasantly quizzed.

"I have my bright moments," he swaggered.

"Yes, but the trouble is you don't have them often enough. Beat it now, before some woodpecker starts working on you. We're busy."

A shrill screech from the swans drew his eyes there.

"Oh, look! What are those things?"

"Egyptian canaries," I told him.

"They look like swans."

"They are swans," Poppy told him.

"But they're black!"

"That's just because it's Saturday," I explained.

"To-morrow they'll be pink."

"I'm going down and take a look at them," he started off.

"And while you're there," laughed Poppy, "ask them if they remember what they did to you last Monday night."

He stopped, staring.

"Was that what knocked me down?"

"Yes," I told him, "but let's hope it'll be a cannonball next time."

"Joke over," he haw-hawed again, strutting off.

"That's got whiskers on it," I yelled.

"So has a barber's floor," he yelled back.

Poppy stood puzzled.

"I've been wondering, Hugo!—do you suppose it was Jerry Ash who took Cookie's things, too?"

"It could have been," I considered. "But certainly he didn't do it to help Little Josh's father, as you thought."

"No. I believe I slipped up there. I just got too dramatic, I guess. Everything that happened, I tried to twist it around to make it appear that the Bergtown man did it himself or was back of it. I had even intended asking Little Josh if his father was out in the storm last night. By the way, what became of the kid, anyway?"

"Oh, he got huffy and went on."

"Huffy? Over what?"

"Because we were on Mrs. Ash's side. Those questions of ours riled him, too."

"He caught on, huh?"

"With emphasis."

"Smart boy. Well, it isn't our fault if he's on the wrong side."

A sudden combined squawk from Tubby and the infuriated swans sent us flying back, Tubby pop-eyed coming on the run to meet us, the swans hot after him. They stopped at sight of us, though, and went back.

"Say!—can those blamed things bite!" Tubby came up gingerly feeling himself behind.

"They thought it was dessert," I told him.

"Were you teasing them?" asked Poppy.

"No. I just stood there on the bank looking at them, and all of a sudden they came at me. Boy, I'm going to clear out of here."

"Thanks," I told him, as he waddled off.

Mrs. Ash and Rodger were outside when we got back.

"What happened, boys?" the old woman anxiously asked.

"Oh," I laughed, "your swans just tried to sharpen their teeth on the seat of Tubby Mundy's pants."

"He's one of the Scouts, Grandma," Rodger explained to her.

Grandma! Boy, he hadn't lost any time. But that was all the better, I told myself. And she plainly liked it, too.

Then, as another car drove in, the old woman excitedly herded us all inside, hiding us in the stuffed-bird room.

"But who is it?" whispered Rodger (as I'll continue to call him), as the car's owner came to the door and knocked.

"Your uncle," I told him.

"My uncle?" he wonderingly repeated.

"Yes," Poppy told him, "the uncle who hid you in Madison and robbed you—and even hired an accomplice to kill you."

Rodger paled.

"I'm afraid," he quavered.

Poppy pulled out a gun.

"Just in case," he grimly told us.

CHAPTER XVII

A DRAMATIC CONFESSION

"MAY I come in, Martha?" we heard the visitor request, in a low quiet voice, when his knock was answered.

"That all depends on what you want to come in for, Harlow Courtland," the old woman cautiously stood her ground, a slight quaver in her voice.

Having heard our story, she was afraid that he had followed Rodger there to harm him—that is why she had hidden us all inside, and now kept him out.

"I've come to make you an offer, Martha," he explained his visit.

"An offer?" she repeated, probably trying to study him through the screen door to better gauge his intentions. "An offer for what?"

"Your property here."

"My property isn't for sale," she flatly refused.

"I'll give you double what it's worth."

"No," she again refused.

"But suppose," came persuasively, "I used my influence to get Jerry out of prison—would you promise to sell then, and the both of you leave here?"

"No," she still refused.

"Is Jerry still here, Martha?" his voice dropped slightly.

"No."

"I heard yesterday that he was out again."

"He went back of his own accord last night."

"There's several things I'd like to talk over with you, Martha," he again tried to get in. "You can't be happy here—with its memories. I don't see how Jerry could ever be happy here, either. That's why I want to set you up in a more comfortable home away from here, where he particularly can start life anew."

She gave a mirthless, almost sneering laugh.

"Has your son been hearing things, Harlow?" she shrewdly inquired.

"Well, is it necessary to blight his life, too? Wouldn't it be better for all concerned to settle our old troubles once and for all?"

Again that harsh mirthless laugh came.

"The years haven't changed you much, have they, Harlow?"

"To the contrary, Martha, they've changed me a lot."

"The thing *you* fear is that your son some day will learn the truth about you. That's why you want to get us away from here. We're a constant reminder to you of your sins—a constant danger to your piece of mind. And then you come here pretending that it's *us* you're thinking about!" she

sneered. "The only change that I can detect in you, Harlow, is that you're grayer and shakier. There's plainly no change in your tricky scheming mind. From the moment of my boy's arrest, I've suspected you and despised you. I had no proof then—it was just a mother's belief. But I have proof now!"

"I'm coming in, Martha," he determinedly announced. "I want to talk this all over with you."

"Yes, do come in," she invited, all fear gone and an all powerful determination to worst him taking its place. "I want you to come in."

"Shall I take this chair by the door?" he asked, inside.

"No—you better sit here beside the table," she directed instead. "I'll have something for you to sign before you leave here."

"Then you *will* sell out to me, Martha?" came eagerly.

"No," she refused for the fourth time.

"But you just said—"

"The time has come for you to tell the truth, Harlow Courtland," she cut him off, in a voice that started to rise.

"The truth?" he repeated.

"Yes, the truth. What did you do with my grandson?" she dramatically demanded.

"Why, he—he was murdered, Martha," came stammeringly.

"Answer me!" her voice rang out. "What did you do with my grandson?"

"Don't look at me that way, Martha," he desperately tried to evade her accusing eyes.

But she relentlessly kept on.

"What did you do with my grandson?" she demanded for the third time.

"He—he was murdered," the voice began to break.

"That's a lie, and you know it. What did you do with my grandson, Harlow Courtland?"

"Martha!" he could barely speak now. "You're crazy! You're mad! You know what happened to him. His own father murdered him."

"I should think you would cringe, Harlow Courtland," she accusingly stood over him, her lips probably curling with pitiless scorn. "Oh," her voice rose, "what a scoundrel you've been! For eighteen years you've let my poor boy suffer in prison, thinking himself a murderer—that he had drunkenly murdered his own child—and all the time you knew there had been no murder at all."

"But there was, Martha!" he stuck to the lie like a drowning man hanging to a straw. "You know what came out at the trial. You know what my sister testified, and—and what they found in the woods."

"What *did* they find in the woods?" she measured each word. "Did they find the child's body?"

"No. But they found its clothes and—and a spade."

"Who put the clothes and the spade there, Harlow?"

"Why!—Jerry, of course," came faintly. "They found his fingerprints on the spade."

"Yes, it was his spade," she conceded. "But he never put it there. It was you, Harlow Courtland," she directly accused. "It was you who put the spade there—also those baby clothes."

"No, Martha!" he cried. "You're crazy!"

"Do you know what brought you here, Harlow Courtland?" her voice then reverently dropped.

"Yes—I came to help you. And I do want to help you," he desperately ran on. "I want to set you up in a happier home, away from here, where you can get these wild thoughts out of your head."

"No, Harlow, that wasn't what brought you here. A just God brought you here. And before you leave, you're going to sign a confession and clear my boy of that murder charge."

He desperately got himself together.

"Listen, Martha!" came roughly. "I've heard enough of this. I'm no fool. I honestly *did* come here to help you. I'm willing to pay you ten thousand dollars for your place. That's five times its real worth. Now let's quit these silly accusations and get down to business."

But he might just as well have tried to stop Niagara. All the misery and suffering that he had brought her were relentlessly and determinedly driving her on.

"For eighteen years," her voice rose accusingly, "you've let my son languish in prison for a crime he never committed. For eighteen years you've carried your guilty secret in your heart. You now have the money you schemed for—you have more money than any one man could ever need. But has it brought you happiness? No! Your hollow begging eyes tell the story of haunted days and sleepless nights. Fear dogs your every step—your every action—your every thought. Fear that after all you'll be found out. Fear that your own son will find you out, and maybe despise you for it in spite of all you have done for him. You think now it will help you keep your filthy secret hidden from him by driving me away from here. Your son then wouldn't be quite so likely to learn what a scoundrel you really are at heart. Oh, you have every reason to cringe, Harlow Courtland. God now has His mark on you. The only thing left to you is confession."

He had to struggle for his voice.

"Why—why do you say such things, Martha?" he finally gasped.

"Because I know the truth," her voice rang out, with conviction that left him no quarter. "For the last time, Harlow Courtland—what did you do with my grandson?"

"Oh," he gave in with a miserable wail, his nerve gone completely, "I can't hide it any longer. It's killing me. I kidnapped him, Martha."

"You got my son drunk that night," she began on him item by item.

"Yes," he barely whispered.

"You put that idea of taking the child into his head."

"Yes."

"It was you who dug that grave and left the spade there."

"Yes."

"And having taken the child out of its drunken father's arms, you took it to Madison."

"Yes."

"You placed it in a Home there."

"Yes."

"Where did you get the money that you left with it?"

"I—I stole part of it from my father."

"Did you ever see the child again?"

"No."

"But you *had* intended to have it finally put out of the way."

"Oh, no, Martha!" the tortured voice rose piteously. "No, no! I kidnapped the baby. I've confessed to that. But I never intended to harm it otherwise."

Poppy here murmured something under his breath.

"What was that?" I eagerly whispered, beside him.

"I was just telling myself, Hugo, that the man

either lied then, or we've been a bunch of stooges. And I'm half inclined to believe that we have been, at that—the way things are turning out.”

“Make it plainer,” I begged. “But don't talk too loud, or they'll hear you.”

“Well, has anything ever happened to Rodger here?”

“Not yet.”

“And why not?”

“Because you and Dory were guarding him.”

“Maybe,” oddly laughed Poppy, “and maybe not. The dwarf might not have been in the slightest danger at any time. We just let Professor Turner's fears overly excite us. We were fighting something that never existed.”

“But we know positively that Cookie intended to kill,” I pointed out.

“We thought so. It certainly looked like it. But maybe that's just a wild theory, too. I've had plenty others come tumbling down on me. I wonder if all detectives go blundering about this way, when first starting out in the business?”

“Blundering nothin'!” I defended him. “You've solved the mystery. What more can you ask?”

“As the old woman just said, Hugo, God did that. The time had come for Rodger to get what had been stolen from him, so God brought us all together here—and this is the result. The man who brought about all the misery is out there confessing it—evidently she's making him write it

down now—Rodger will be riding around in five-thousand-dollar limousines, and to-morrow Dory and I will be back in Madison telling people what clever detectives we are. As I look back, and think of all we've said and done and the blunders we've made, I certainly want to laugh. The only one, *I* think, who's done any real detecting is you yourself, Hugo. When you found that elephant, that turned the trick. And it was God who planned that, too. It can be explained in no other way."

"Yes," I maintained, "but it took clever detecting to learn that there was an elephant, and then put everything together here. Maybe you did make mistakes. And maybe some of your theories were duds. But if you'll talk it all over with Mr. Trot when you get home, I bet he'll tell you that you did exactly the right thing. Think of everything, and then weed out all but the one true theory. That's what he'd do, I bet, and that's practically what you did, too. Anyway," I wound up, "that's what makes a detective story exciting."

And practically at the end of my story now, I'm hoping it has given you some fun and that you'll want to follow Poppy and Dory in their next detective case. I probably won't be in it. This probably is the last you'll ever hear of the wonderful (ahem!) Hugo Spinner Frey. But whoever tells the story, with Poppy and Dory in it and doing

better detecting each month as they learn, I'm certain it'll be a good story.

Little Josh's father was a pitiable sight when he finally left that memorable afternoon. In the later legal settlement, Rodger could have taken the whole estate, by the terms of a will made shortly after his birth, but he generously gave the others half, little Josh going off with his broken father then and completely out of our lives. Where the two are now I haven't the slightest idea. Rodger now occupies that big stone house instead, and with him, happy at last, are his active grandmother and his vindicated father.

That night, around a roaring campfire, Poppy, Dory and I told the others the whole amazing story. I started it, telling how I first met the Hidden Dwarf in the woods, then Dory picked up, telling how I came to his house for help for the unfortunate dwarf, Poppy finally finishing.

A flood of questions followed, Dill Pickle especially wanting to know how beginning detectives got their first cases. He'd like to be a detective himself, he said—and throughout the balance of the evening (dumb to the end!) he snooped around with his Scout hat pulled down over his eyes, with a piece of rope for a mustache, telling us in garbled Chinese that he was Sing Boy Sing, the famous Chinese detective.

Which reminds me! Poppy and Dory explicitly told me, when I wrote this book, to explain why

little Fu Wong Pu, so helpful to them in their earlier "Monkey's Paw" case, wasn't in this one. The three boys had planned to work together, and still may, for that matter. But Fu Wong was in the east with Captain Kegg when this case came up, and so missed being in it. But I'm tempted to say here that we didn't really miss him. With little old Detective Frey on the case (another *ahem!*), everything was bound to come out all right.

Our fireside story over, Mr. Quickley then told us what *he* knew, thus settling a point that puzzled Poppy up to the very last.

"You two boys may be clever detectives," he laughingly told Poppy and Dory, "but you didn't deceive me. You had let on that you were just driving Rodger up—and yet, deciding to stay, you had a complete layout of clothing with you. I knew then that you had intended remaining from the first. And I soon grasped that it was to guard Rodger. No matter where he went, one of you, I noticed, was always a few rods behind. Then you three had a whole room to yourselves, too—all certainly planned. It worried me the first day or two—but I soon got over it and practically forgot all about it. As for Cookie—he was exactly what he pretended to be, boys—one of the best friends Scouts ever had. Losing his entire business, and down almost to his last dollar, he came to me, telling me that he'd like to come back here for a couple of weeks, offering, if I'd include

him, to do all our cooking. I think he particularly wanted to see again the grave of the young woman he was to have married. I know his love for her never died. Hard pressed for money, as I say, he had tried writing exciting detective stories, and that paper Poppy just mentioned was nothing more sinister, I'm sure, than a list of suggested story titles. He had seen what was going on around the dwarf, like me, and no doubt thought he could get a good story out of it."

And now, a few final words on the case, and I'll drop it.

In his written confession, the kidnapper told in detail how he had taken the baby from its drunken father, then driven in the night to Madison. In disposing of the baby there, he had threatened death to the proprietor if the child ever was permitted to get away from the Home, which explains Professor Turner's fears. The kidnapper had said he'd be back for "his son" some day, but it's doubtful if he meant that. Just why he had taken the china elephant, he couldn't explain. He had noticed it—he had acted on impulse—and in the end it led to his complete undoing. How he could do what he did, and then give the trinket to an innocent girl, is beyond me. He seemed to have had no conscience at all then. But it gave him plenty of trouble later, even affecting his heart. That, and the news that the wronged brother-in-law was again back in the neighborhood, is what caused his particular agitation the day I met him.

CHAPTER XVIII

CONCLUSION

THE case solved, and the mystery over, the rest of our stay there was just fun. But finally we came to the last night and the giving out of the awards. Almost everybody got something, with us carrying off the honors for the neatest room.

But who, we kept wondering, would get the prize trophy of all—a beautiful silver Boy Scout statue mounted on a black base? I thought I had a pretty good chance. So did Ned and Bobbie, and almost everybody else except poor dumb Dill Pickle. He knew, of course, that he was out of it, and after the other awards were given out he went off singing to the dish-washing job, as usual.

“Aren’t you going to come in and see who gets the big award?” I ran out to inquire.

“No,” he laughed. “You fellows can fight it out among you. But I hope, Spinner, it’ll be you.”

Mr. Quickley was making a speech when I got back.

“—and the one boy, according to our records and my own personal observation, who has been the most helpful, the most cheerful and who has done the most in all things to keep the camp going smoothly and happily, is Richard Dillon. And

now, boys, let's give him a hand. Come on, Scouts—use your hands!”

And *did* we give him a hand! Oh, boy!

“But where is he?” Mr. Quickley looked around surprised.

“Out washing dishes,” I told him.

We all tiptoed out then, and there was old Dill Pickle, out there all alone, banging away in the dish pan and singing at the top of his voice: “She’ll still be washing dishes when she comes; she’ll still be washing dishes when she comes; she’ll still be washing—”

“Look!” I popped the trophy around in front of him. “Here it is, Dill Pickle.”

“And you really won it, huh?” his face lit up. “Congratulations, Spinner. Oh, boy! Oh, boy! Am I glad! Whoopee!”

And up went the dish-rag to the ceiling—Tubby ducking instinctively.

But when we told Dill Pickle the truth, instead of continuing his hilarious jig, he just stood there stupidly staring. I honestly believe that to this day he’s wondering how it ever happened. But I bet *you* had him picked for a winner—huh?

As I conclude, I just got word that Rodger is going to the hospital for an operation. When he comes out in a few weeks he’ll be an entirely different boy, Dr. Largo has promised. Of course, he’ll always be a dwarf; and he can never be completely cured; but those old torturing pains

will be gone forever. So with' him, as with Dill Pickle the champion dumb-bell, everything comes to a happy end.

But as I close, wishing you all good-by and thanking you for letting me tell my story in my own crazy way, let me urge you again to go on with Poppy and Dory in their following detective adventures.

That's all! I'm fading out fast, Scouts—and everybody else.

And now I'm gone!

THE END



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